ALL STORIES NEW... NO REPRINTS

RANCH ROMANCES

ANC

25c

A THRILLING PUBLICATION
THIRD APRIL NUMBER

FEATURING: **RANCHER'S QUEST**
by Harrison Colt

NO GUNS FOR SODBUSTERS
by Charles M. Burnson

CAN YOU GIVE AWAY FREE HOSIERY?

AMAZING *NEW* MONEY-MAKING PLAN!

Up to $3 An Hour For Your Spare Time!

Men and women wanted to introduce amazing nylon stockings (guaranteed against runs and snags) and men's, children's hosiery (guaranteed one full year) by giving away free trial pairs regardless whether or not final purchase is made!

Think of showing free sample included in outfits and saying to any woman: "Will you accept a pair of these beautiful nylon stockings, guaranteed against runs, undue wear and even snags, just to prove how good they are?"

Picture yourself showing sample of new miracle sock (included free with outfits) and saying to men: "Here is a new miracle one size, two-way stretch nylon sock that will fit any size foot. It contains no rubber yet will cling to your foot like a second skin. It never sags or droops, retains its shape and is guaranteed ONE FULL YEAR! Would you like a gift pair to try out?"

What man or woman will refuse a gift pair to try? Doesn't it sound unbelievable? Beginners, who never sold a thing before, find themselves "experts" at giving away free trial pairs of hosiery.

Over a million dollars has already been earned by men and women just like yourself. Everything is furnished so that you can begin earning money the minute you receive free samples and outfits. Just mail the coupon or send your name and address on a postcard.

Buy nothing. Deliver nothing. Pay nothing now or later. No obligation. Prove to yourself how easily you can make up to $3 an hour just in your spare time, telling friends and neighbors about the amazing new free gift offer on luxurious guaranteed nylon stockings and new miracle socks guaranteed for one full year. Mail coupon NOW for free samples and complete money-making outfits all postage prepaid!

FREE SAMPLES!

•

KENDEX CORPORATION

BABYLON 243, N. Y.

Kendex Corporation,
Babylon 243, New York.

Date 1955

Send me free samples of nylon hosiery and socks with complete money-making outfits all postage prepaid. There is nothing for me to pay now or later and I do not have to return equipment if I'm not satisfied with the money I earn.

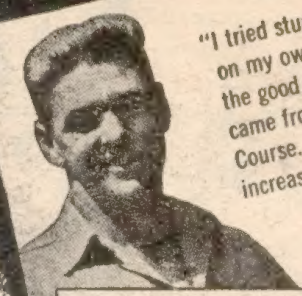
Name . . . . . .

Address . . . . . .

Town & State . . . . . .

ARE YOU TOO OLD TO LEARN?

not at all, scientists say



"I tried studying my work on my own, but I never got the good out of it that came from my I. C. S. Course. My salary has been increased 73.3%!"
E.L.B.
Ohio

New tests show that: your ability to think increases with age; your powers of deduction are greater; your judgment is better.

In the I. C. S. files are thousands of cases of men and women of every age. Their successes, their promotions, their raises prove that men and women past school age can learn!

I.C.S. GIVES YOU EXPERT GUIDANCE FREE! Do you have the feeling you're "stuck" in your job? Your trained I. C. S. counselor will appraise your abilities, help you plan for the future.

IT'S NEVER TOO LATE TO GET STARTED! You study with I. C. S. at home, in your spare time. There's no interference with business or social activity. Famous I. C. S. texts make learning easy. Don't delay. Pick your field from the coupon below. And mail it today!

"I am president of a small corporation. A year ago I enrolled with I. C. S. as the most practical means available to me to learn what I needed."
W.J.A.
Michigan

"It's been so long since I went to school, I've forgotten much. But now that I'm taking an I. C. S. Course, I have confidence in my ability again."
H.A.R.
New Jersey

Actual statements. Posed by models.

3 FREE BOOKS

36-page, pocket-size guide to advancement, a gold mine of tips on "How to Succeed." Big catalog outlining opportunities in your field of interest. Also free sample I. C. S. lesson.

For Real Job Security — Get an I.C.S. Diploma! Easy Pay Plan — I.C.S., Scranton 9, Penna.

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

ICS

BOX 99276C, SCRANTON 9, PENNA.

(Partial list of 277 courses)

Without cost or obligation, send me "HOW to SUCCEED" and the opportunity booklet about the field BEFORE which I have marked X (plus sample lesson):

ARCHITECTURE and BUILDING CONSTRUCTION
- ☐ Air Conditioning—Refrig.
- ☐ Architecture
- ☐ Architectural Interior
- ☐ Building Contractor
- ☐ Building Maintenance
- ☐ Carpenter and Mill Work
- ☐ Estimating
- ☐ Heating
- ☐ Painting Contractor
- ☐ Plumbing
- ☐ Reading Arch. Blueprints

ART
- ☐ Cartooning
- ☐ Commercial Art
- ☐ Fashion Illustrating
- ☐ Magazine Illustrating
- ☐ Show Card and Sign Lettering
- ☐ Sketching and Painting

AUTOMOTIVE
- ☐ Auto Body Rebuilding
- ☐ Auto Elec. Technician
- ☐ Auto-Engine Tune Up
- ☐ Automobile

AVIATION
- ☐ Aeronautical Engineering Jr.
- ☐ Aircraft & Engine Mechanic

BUSINESS
- ☐ Advertising
- ☐ Bookkeeping and Accounting
- ☐ Business Administration
- ☐ Business Correspondence
- ☐ Public Accounting
- ☐ Creative Salesmanship
- ☐ Federal Tax
- ☐ Letter-writing Improvement
- ☐ Office Management
- ☐ Professional Secretary
- ☐ Retail Business Management
- ☐ Sales Management
- ☐ Stenographic-Secretarial
- ☐ Traffic Management

CHEMISTRY
- ☐ Analytical Chemistry
- ☐ Chemical Engineering
- ☐ Chem. Lab. Technician
- ☐ General Chemistry
- ☐ Natural Gas Prod. & Trans.
- ☐ Petroleum Engineering
- ☐ Plastics
- ☐ Pulp and Paper Making

CIVIL, STRUCTURAL ENGINEERING
- ☐ Civil Engineering
- ☐ Construction Engineering
- ☐ Highway Engineering
- ☐ Reading Struct. Blueprints
- ☐ Sanitary Engineering
- ☐ Structural Engineering
- ☐ Surveying and Mapping

DRAFTING
- ☐ Aircraft Drafting
- ☐ Architectural Drafting
- ☐ Electrical Drafting
- ☐ Mechanical Drafting
- ☐ Mine Surveying and Mapping
- ☐ Plumbing Drawing and Estimating
- ☐ Structural Drafting

ELECTRICAL
- ☐ Electrical Engineering
- ☐ Electrical Maintenance
- ☐ Electrician ☐ Contracting
- ☐ Lineman

HIGH SCHOOL
- ☐ Commercial ☐ Good English
- ☐ High School Subjects
- ☐ Mathematics

LEADERSHIP
- ☐ Foremanship
- ☐ Industrial Supervision
- ☐ Leadership and Organization
- ☐ Personnel-Labor Relations

MECHANICAL AND SHOP
- ☐ Gas—Electric Welding
- ☐ Heat Treatment ☐ Metallurgy
- ☐ Industrial Engineering
- ☐ Industrial Instrumentation
- ☐ Industrial Supervision
- ☐ Internal Combustion Engines
- ☐ Machine Design-Drafting
- ☐ Machine Shop Inspection
- ☐ Machine Shop Practice
- ☐ Mechanical Engineering
- ☐ Quality Control
- ☐ Reading Shop Blueprints
- ☐ Refrigeration
- ☐ Sheet Metal Worker
- ☐ Tool Design ☐ Toolmaking

RADIO, TELEVISION
- ☐ Industrial Electronics
- ☐ Practical Radio TV Eng'r'ng
- ☐ Radio and TV Servicing
- ☐ Radio Operating
- ☐ Television Technician

RAILROAD
- ☐ Air Brakes ☐ Car Inspector
- ☐ Diesel Locomotive
- ☐ Locomotive Engineer
- ☐ Section Foreman

STEAM AND DIESEL POWER
- ☐ Combustion Engineering
- ☐ Diesel—Elec. ☐ Diesel Eng's
- ☐ Electric Light and Power
- ☐ Stationary Fireman
- ☐ Stationary Steam Engineering

TEXTILE
- ☐ Carding and Spinning
- ☐ Cotton, Rayon, Woolen Mfg.
- ☐ Finishing and Dyeing
- ☐ Loom Fixi'g ☐ Textile Des'ing
- ☐ Textile Eng'r'g ☐ Throwing
- ☐ Warping and Weaving

MISCELLANEOUS
- ☐ Domestic Refrigeration
- ☐ Marine Engineering
- ☐ Ocean Navigation
- ☐ Professional Engineering
- ☐ Short Story Writing
- ☐ Telephony

Name_____ Age_____ Home Address_____

City_____ Zone_____ State_____ Working Hours_____ A.M. to P.M._____

Occupation_____

Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools, Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada. . . . Special tuition rates to members of the U. S. Armed Forces.

31st Year
OF PUBLICATION

THIRD
APRIL NUMBER

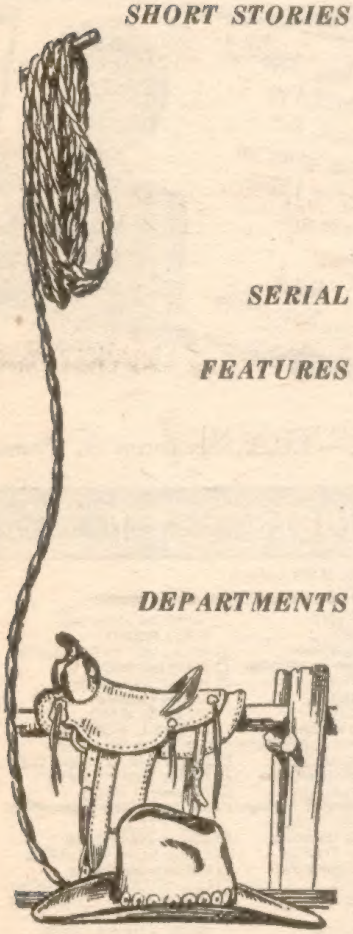
April 22, 1955
Volume 191, No. 2

RANCH ROMANCES

CONTENTS

ON SALE EVERY OTHER FRIDAY

NOVEL	RANCHER'S QUEST	Harrison Colt	14
NOVELETTE	NO GUNS FOR SODBUSTERS	Charles M. Burnson	54
SHORT STORIES	KILLER IN TOWN	Ben Frank	43
	SHE SAID SHE HATED TEXANS	Theodore J. Roemer	70
	THE BRAINS OF THE FAMILY	Donald Bayne Hobart	80
	SHORT GRASS	Dorothy Roseborough	87
SERIAL	RED SUNDOWN, Part Three	Ray Gaulden	97
FEATURES	WOMEN OF THE WEST, a Fact Story	Kay Heistand	53
	SNOW NO!, Verse	Limerick Luke	75
	PONY EXPRESS, JUNIOR GRADE, a True Story	T. J. Kerttula and D. L. McDonald	84
DEPARTMENTS	OUR AIR MAIL	Our Readers	6
	TRAIL DUST		9
	RANCH FLICKER TALK Strange Lady in Town Alan Ladd	Bob Cummings	10 12
	CROSSWORD PUZZLE		42
	KNOW YOUR WEST, a Quiz	Rattlesnake Robert	86
	OUT OF THE CHUTES	The Editors	96
	WHOM SHALL I MARRY?	Professor Marcus Mari	114



HELEN TONO
Editor

RANCH ROMANCES issued by-weekly by Literary Enterprises, Inc., 1125 E. Vaile Ave., Kokomo, Ind. N. L. Pines, President. Entered as Second Class matter at the Post Office at Kokomo, Ind., under Act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25c; Yearly subscription, $5.00; add 80c for Canadian, $1.50 for foreign and Pan-American subscriptions. Editorial and Executive Offices, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Title registered as Trade Mark in U. S. Patent Office. Copyright 1955 by Literary Enterprises, Inc. Printed in the U.S.A. The names of all persons in fiction stories in this magazine have no reference to any person living or dead. Ranch Romances does not assume responsibility for safe return of unsolicited manuscripts.

READ ABOUT HOLLYWOOD'S MOST GLAMOROUS STARS!

Their lives!

Their loves!

Their fabulous careers!

Get your copy of SCREENLAND Magazine today...
On sale at all newsstands

Lost Her Mom

Dear Editor:

This is my first try to get into Our Air Mail. Last August I lost my mother, and my dad and I sure miss her. I would like to have a pen pal about 50, so dad and I could write to her. Daddy is 57 years of age, 5'10" tall, weighs 175 lbs., with brown hair and blue eyes. We will answer all letters.

HELEN DAVIS

c/o Elmer Choan
Brownson, Nebr., R.F.D. #1

Texas Lad

Dear Editor:

I am originally from Dallas, Texas, but am now in the Army. I would love to hear from anyone. I am 21 years of age, 6'1" tall, weigh 180 lbs., and have black hair. So come on and write a lonely G.I.

ROBERT E. BETZ
US 56196434
Co. "C" 17 Inf. Regt. A.P.O. 7
San Francisco, Calif.

No Age Limit

Dear Editor:

I have been a constant reader of Ranch Romances for some time now, and would like to put in a request for pen pals. I am 5'10" tall, weigh 150 lbs., have brown hair and green eyes. I'm a bachelor of 35. I would like to hear from all the gals—with no age limit, either. I like hunting, trapping, hiking, fishing and sailing. So come on, gals, and fill by mail box up to the brim.

ALBIN C. SYVERTSEN
3838 N. Sheffield Avenue
Chicago, Ill.
Apt. 32-B

Bohemian Temper

Dear Editor:

Hope this try helps a certain city girl of 14 to get letters quick. I love to draw, and someday want to live on a farm. I would especially like to hear from farm folk between 14 & 21. I don't care if they come from Africa's hottest lands or Alaska's freezing point, just so this girl with chestnut hair, 5'5" tall, and with a slight Bohemian temper gets letters.

GEORGETTE DUBRAVE
2962 N. Allen Avenue
Chicago, Ill.

Music Lover

Dear Editor:

This is my third try at getting pen pals, and here's hoping I succeed. I am 25, stand 5'6" tall, have brown hair and brown eyes. I'm German and Irish. I like most sports, love music. My hobby is collecting souvenir handkerchiefs and music boxes. It's hard making friends in a big city, so come on and write.

VIOLET HAMELBERG
1432 N. Fairfield
Chicago, 22, Ill.

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 30 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Lonely Me

Dear Editor:

I am a very lonely widow in my sixties. I would like to gain pen pals, so I hope you can find a corner for me in your magazine. I love all outdoor sports, especially fishing, hunting, and camping. I also love music and traveling. So come on, people of any age, I will answer all letters.

DORA A. McDERMOTT

1503 Sacramento Street
St. Joseph, Mo.

Blue Eyes

Dear Editor:

I would like to have my name placed in Our Air Mail, if possible. I am a lonely girl of 16, stand 5'6½" tall and weigh 121 lbs. I have blue eyes and brown hair. I would love to hear from servicemen, and will gladly exchange snapshots.

EDWINA DEFFENBAUGH

811 South Jefferson Street
Modesto, Calif.

At Least a Card

Dear Editor:

I've been a reader of RANCH ROMANCES for about 6 years, and now I am calling for pen pals of all ages. I'm a boy of 20, eager to make new friends. I have loads of interesting things to write about, and will gladly exchange picture postcards. I feel sure I can make my letters worthwhile. How about it pen pals? Throw some mail my way, even if it's only a picture postcard.

Victor Bourne

Alkins Rd.,
Canington's Village
St. Miclael
Barbadoes, B.W.I.

Canadian Miss

Dear Editor:

I am new to Vancouver and need your letters to drive away the loneliness. I am 17, 5'5" tall, 125 lbs, dark auburn hair and hazel eyes. I would like letters from everyone from 1 to 100. I have traveled all over the North and a great deal in the South, so I'm sure I can make my letters appeal to someone. I love music, reading, and writing letters, and horses. Come on, one and all, write me.

Marion Leal

1168 East Hastings St.
Vancouver 6, B.C.
Canada

Tomboy

Dear Editor:

Here's hoping this plea reaches the hearts of many. I'm 16 years old, stand 5'5" tall, have long brown hair and gray eyes, and weigh 120 lbs. I am somewhat of a tomboy. I love horses, and I love to ride them. I write poems, songs, and short stories, and I also draw. Swimming and skating are two of my favorite sports. Come on guys and gals, please write.

Elsie Lee Essary

2107 14th St.
Hondo, Texas

Swiss Yodeler

Dear Editor:

I am a man of 26, stand 5'8½" tall, weigh 161 lbs, and have dark brown eyes and curly brown hair. I have some sports and hobbies, such as swimming, horseback riding, dancing and listening to music, Western type preferred. I play a guitar, sing and Swiss yodel. I would love to hear from gals from 20 to 27. So come on, you gals, and write.

Jack Hay

1115 Colorado Avenue
Boise, Idaho

Okie

Dear Editor:

Please help me on this second try to get into the Air Mail circle. I am a lonely little Okie who would like to hear from boys and girls all over the United States and from foreign countries. I love to write, like all sports, and love a good time. I am 18 years old and a junior in high school. I have dark hair, eyes, and complexion, am 5' tall and weigh 105 lbs. I will answer all the letters I receive, and will exchange pictures with anyone who wishes to do so.

Wanda Bentley

Box 253
Albion, Okla.

Student

Dear Editor:

I read RANCH ROMANCES and would like to get into the Air Mail column, as I am very lonely. I'm 16, and a high school student. I have light brown hair and gray eyes, and am 5'5" tall. I'd like to hear from guys and gals 16 to 25.

Martha Decker

Rt. 6, Box 328
Lenoir, N. C.

Cherokee

Dear Editor:

I'm 32, 6' tall, weigh 170 lbs., and have dark blond hair and blue-gray eyes. I'm German-Cherokee, I'm single, and I really do enjoy writing. I like the outdoor life, and enjoy most sports. I'm very much interested in corresponding with any Cherokee maiden anywhere in the United States. Will answer all letters.

Jack Baker, Jr.

Route 1
Diana, Tex.

Canadienne

Dear Editor:

I would like to have my letter published in Our Air Mail. I'm 17 years old, am 5'5" tall, weigh 120 lbs., and have red hair and blue eyes. My favorite pastimes are dancing and watching television.

Cora Besley

Box 111, Wellington St.
Ontario, Canada

Calling Westerners

Dear Editor:

I am a girl of 14, 5'4" tall, weighing 130 lbs. I have brown hair and brown eyes. My hobbies are horseback riding, collecting snapshots, and going to movies. I would like very much to hear from girls and boys around my own age from Texas, New Mexico and Arizona.

Dalice Warnke

213 Clithero Dr.
Boise, Ida.

Come on, Girls

Dear Editor:

This is my first try to get into the Air Mail column. I am 21 years old, weigh 170 lbs., have brown hair and blue eyes, and am 5'11½" tall. I promise to answer all letters from any girl between the ages of 18 to 21. How about it, girls?

Joseph M. Hinton

1326 Stevens Dr.
Richland, Wash.

Let's Be Friends

Dear Editor:

I read RANCH ROMANCES all the time, so may I have the opportunity to get acquainted with some pen pals through the Air Mail column? I live alone, and I'm lonesome. I like all sports, traveling, and meeting nice people. I'm congenial and easy to please. So come on, let's be friends.

Mrs. J. Dmowski

117½ No. Edgeware Rd.
Los Angeles 26, Calif.

DON'T LET THIS SPECIAL OFFER GET AWAY!

By accepting this special introductory deal, you save a big $1.01 on single-copy costs – assure uninterrupted delivery of RANCH ROMANCES right to your home!

Here's what you get for little more than a penny a day if you act *now:*

- *over 1700 pages of western-style love and action*
- *more than 100 new novels, novelettes and short stories*
- *almost 25 stranger-than-fiction true tales of the Old West*
- *plus a regular Western movie feature by Robert Cummings . . . personal correspondence column . . . advice on love and marriage . . . cartoons . . . Western crosswords . . . and much, much more.*

32 weeks (16 issues) of RANCH ROMANCES only **$2.99**

Use this handy order form today to take advantage of the *greatest reading bargain in America!*

RANCH ROMANCES 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. RR-4-3

Yes, enter my RANCH ROMANCES subscription for the next 32 weeks (16 issues) at only $2.99 . . . a money-saving rate that brings me the equivalent of 4 issues as a gift. My $2.99 is enclosed.

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ ZONE _____ STATE _____

(Add 50¢ for Canadian postage; $1.00 for foreign)

TRAIL DUST

PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found them. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!

A MARQUETTE, Mich., bear helped a game warden get his man—who was catching fish illegally in the middle of a stream. The warden's authority didn't extend that far, so he could do nothing till a bear charged the fisherman from the opposite side of the stream, sending him running right into the warden's arms.

AN HONEST Lincoln, Nebr., man returned $1,100 in endorsed checks to a supermarket, explaining that the checks had been wrapped up in the package with some bacon he bought.

IN TACOMA, Wash., a woman was assured that she didn't have to use the marriage license she had taken out a few days previously. "That's good," she said, "because I found a better man, and we'll be up to get a new license."

THE SHERIFF of Huron, S.D., won't be able to keep his bloodhound around any more. The dog was evicted from the courthouse grounds for biting the chairman of the Board of County Commissioners.

A SACRAMENTO, Calif., jewelry store owner is out to get business one way or another. He ran an ad in the local paper advising whoever stole the watches from his store window that the watches carry a lifetime guarantee, and he's willing to repair them free at any time.

FAILING to find any other charge against two boys brought into his court, a Des Moines judge finally fined them $1 for "riding horses without a light."

THE TRAFFIC situation in Shawnee, Okla., is getting out of hand. One man landed his private plane at the Municipal Airport, and almost immediately afterward a second plane landed on top of the first.

A FORT WORTH, Tex., pickpocket with modern ideas has been using a squirt gun to spray a line of acid around men's hip pockets. The acid eats through the cloth and the pocket—and billfold—drop out.

HUNDREDS of people gathered in a Los Angeles street to peer at a man sitting on the window sill of a fifth-floor hotel room. The cause of all the disturbance explained to police who pleaded with him not to jump, "I'm sitting here to cool off; I was hot."

SOMETIMES it doesn't pay to obey the law. For instance, there's the case of a bull that escaped from the Denver, Colo., stockyards, and was outdistancing all its pursuers till it stopped too long for a red light.

THE BURGLAR who entered a Santa Monica, Calif., music shop and stole a ukelele also took an instruction book—on how to play a harmonica.

RANCH
FLICKER TALK

by movie editor BOB CUMMINGS

This famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns

Strange Lady in Town

Greer Garson tries a new kind of role . . . in a Western from Warner Bros. that has both romance and exciting action

PEOPLE make a lot of fun of Hollywood titles which often seem to have nothing to do with the plot. But *Strange Lady in Town* is just perfect—not only to describe the heroine of the story, but also to fit the star in her part.

For Greer Garson is undoubtedly a strange lady to turn up in a Western. She's never tackled a role like this before, and we're inclined to picture her in an elegant British drawing room, not in the rough and dusty streets of Tucson, Ariz., in 1879.

The reason the lady is there is that she's a doctor who has been run out of her native Boston for trying to practice such an unladylike profession.

And the reason Greer is doing the part is simply because it is a strange and different role for her.

"I thought it would be fun to get into some violent action for a change instead of sitting around tinkling a teaspoon against a saucer," she told me.

"It was fun, though I got rather more action than I expected," she added.

Greer came through a horse and buggy smash-up, a brush fire and a fight scene just fine.

The real action had nothing to do with the movie. It occurred when she had to be rushed from the set for an emergency appendectomy.

She was hospitalized for a couple of weeks, while the cameras shot around her. But eventually she returned fit as a fiddle to finish the picture.

It was a buggy, not usually considered a real menance on the highways, which gave co-star Dana Andrews his most hazardous moments.

The buggy is a graceful, light-weight vehicle, but after four accidents Dana decided he'd rather take the wheel of a broken-down jalopy than the reins of a horse pulling this particular carriage.

Once he had to jump from it when a bolt in the shaft pulled out. He almost sprained his ankle trying to get into the carriage when

it was standing still because the step plate broke.

Another time the shaft was splintered by the horse's hoofs. Finally the unlucky buggy lost a wheel when it was kicked by another horse.

Even after all those mishaps, the buggy had to stay in the movie, because it had been shown in too many scenes to be cut.

Director Mervyn LeRoy said, "I've never known a temperamental actress to cause as many retakes as that buggy did. If I had, I'd probably have fired her." Then he added thoughtfully, "You just don't get so mad at a buggy. At least it doesn't answer back when you bawl it out."

Next to the buggy the most troublesome problem the cast had to cope with was an insect invasion.

Swarms of gnats wanted to get into the act. They were annoying to the actors in long shots, but that was the actors' worry. In close-ups they were the cameraman's worry, because they showed up clearly on the film, detracting considerably from the romance of a love scene, for instance.

After trying everything from citronella to DDT, the crew finally set up some wind machines, which blew the gnats out of camera range.

Then the blowers were turned off, and the scene would start playing again until the gnats returned.

Having read all this backstage chatter, maybe you'd like to know what happens on stage.

There are two interwoven stories in *Strange Lady in Town.* One concerns the strange medical lady and the established doctor, and the other concerns Greer's wild, lawless brother and Dana's lovely headstrong daughter, (Cameron Mitchell and Lois Smith) two reckless youngsters whose tragic story almost wrecks the romance of Greer and Dana.

There's humor and sadness in the picture; there's love and action. Greer Garson may be a strange lady in Tucson, Ariz., but she settles down in the West as though she belonged there.

Dana Andrews worries about the interest Greer's red hair arouses

ALAN LADD
Dual Personality

RANCH FLICKER TALK

ALAN LADD has a split personality—but not one the psychiatrists would be interested in, because the two sides of his character get along nicely together.

You know what he's like on the screen—a tough guy with a hair trigger on his temper and on his gun. But, off the screen, the two words that describe him best are "meek" and "mild." You *can't* pick a fight with him.

Alan thinks the main reason he's so easy-going in real life is that he has an outlet for his more violent emotions in the roles he plays.

"And I'm one of those actors," he added, "who believes a little bit in the characters I play. I have to live them a little bit. Therefore I get it all out of my system."

He's really a shy person, and yet a guy who hates to be alone. He especially hates to eat alone. His make-up man has a standing invitation to lunch in Alan's dressing room when a movie is in progress, and other of his friends on the Warner Bros. lot drop in for a snack during the noon break, so that often the Ladd dressing room looks like a prosperous diner.

Alan is well supplied with friends at Warners, where he has been under contract for a couple of years now, after a ten-year career exclusively with Paramount. When Alan came to Warners, no one but he knew that he was actually returning to the studio which gave him his first movie job—not as an actor, but as a worker in the back-lot labor gang at $45 a week.

The story of Alan and Sue Carol is well known—how she became first his agent (and got him his first break), then his sweetheart, and then a happy combination of both, as his wife. They have four children—one apiece by previous marriages, and two together—and they all live comfortably and casually in a big house near Hollywood. Between pictures and on week-ends they spend their time on a ranch, where Alan raises horses for fun and chickens for money. It amuses him that, after his acting contract with Paramount expired, the commissary went right on buying his eggs.

"And you should hear the jokes my so-called friends make about *that*," he grinned. "They tell me I laid an egg at Paramount, and I should have left it to the hens."

This, of course, is only a joke, for the last picture Alan made for Paramount was the very successful *Shane*. And he signed at Warners for the privilege of choosing his own scripts and having the freedom to make an occasional movie on his own.

His choice of pictures is the outdoor kind. He admits now he was never happy in his early career as a gunman. But in spite of his preference for Westerns, he's quite excited about the movie he's making now with June Allyson, *The McConnell Story*, a dramatization of the life of triple jet ace Capt. Joseph McConnell.

"I guess I like Captain Joe," said Alan, "because he's as much of a hero and a pioneer today as the early Westerners were in their day. It sure feels strange to be in an Army uniform, though, instead of buckskin or blue jeans."

Apparently the two younger Ladd children didn't approve of the costume, because they sent him a present of a pair of hand-tooled riding boots, delivered to the studio with the suggestion that he wear them in his next picture.

"The kids love Westerns," Alan told me, showing off the handsome boots, "so I guess these are a hint about the kind of movies they'd like me to make. They don't have to worry. I'll make plenty."

Warner Bros.

Alan's no tough guy off screen—he's mild and easy-going

Rancher's

Quest

by HARRISON COLT

DANE BORLAND'S SEARCH for his bride-to-be led to an army traitor, an Indian massacre . . . and the arms of another woman

DANE BORLAND emerged from the post headquarters building at Fort Banning and stood frowning across the deserted parade grounds. His interview with the Post Commandant, Major Hawes, had been less than satisfactory, and he had learned little that he had not known earlier.

As he stood there, a tall man wearing the Stetson and high-heeled boots of a cattleman, the little fringe of blond hair visible below his hat seemed oddly bright against the darkness of his face and neck, burned a coffee-brown by sun and wind. His clothes were still finely powdered with the dust of several days' stage travel, and had the look of having been slept in.

A lanky trooper was advancing from the stables, leading a saddled roan toward Post Headquarters. On a sudden impulse, Dane Borland stepped across the parade ground to intercept him.

After listening to the rancher's query, the man waved his arm in the direction of a neat, precisely-

spaced line of buildings that faced the parade ground on the south.

"Captain Connors's quarters, sir? Third house from the end of the Officer's Row."

Borland nodded his thanks and headed across the parade ground, walking with brisk, long strides that gave no evidence of the burden of defeat and frustration that was pressing down upon him. Arriving at the house that had been pointed out to him, he halted abruptly, staring at it with a return of his earlier uncertainty.

But, after that minute's hesitation, he straightened his shoulders, drew a deep breath and marched up the gravel walk, the stones crunching noisily under his high heels. He mounted the porch steps, stepped to the door and rapped on it firmly and loudly.

A girl opened the door in response to his knock. Dane quickly removed his Stetson.

"Afternoon, Miss," he began. "My name is Dane Borland. I'd like to speak with Captain Connors."

"I'm afraid that's impossible right now," the girl said firmly. "Couldn't you come back tomorrow?"

Dane frowned impatiently. "Miss, I reckon you don't understand. I've got to see Captain Connors right now."

THE sharpness in his tone brought a slight flush to the girl's cheeks. "For your information," she replied tartly, "my father has just returned to the post after a week-long patrol. During that time the patrol was attacked by hostiles, and some of their horses were run off. For the last three days, they had to share the mounts and cover much of the distance back to the post on foot. Dad's no longer a young man, and he's dead tired. I happen to think that it's most important that he *not* be disturbed at this time!"

Disappointment moved across the rancher's face. He sighed heavily and said, "I realize this is an imposition on my part, and I'm sorry for it. But there's something I must know, and your dad is the only one who can give me the information I need."

"Information about what?" inquired the girl.

"Those wagons that were wiped out by the Sioux near Whitewater Canyon. I understand your father was in command of the party that found the remains of them."

"But couldn't you find out what you want to know from someone else? Have you seen Major Hawes?"

Borland nodded. "I just came from talking to Major Hawes. Also, I've read the report your father turned in. But there are still some questions in my mind. I believe there's a chance your father may be able to give me the answers. That's why it's so necessary for me to speak with him."

A perturbed look came into the girl's blue eyes. She bit her lip unhappily. "You're certain, Mr. Borland, that these answers won't wait until tomorrow?"

"Miss Connors," he said earnestly, "I don't know how to tell you this. But ever since I learned about a possibility that someone I love very dearly was with those wagons, I haven't had a moment's peace or rest. I have to know the truth."

The girl's face had softened. "I think I understand," she said gently.

Filled with concern and apprehension as he was, Dane still could not help noticing the slender grace of her body, the lovely contrast of her complexion, burned a pale gold by the sun, against the sheer raven-black of her hair.

She made up her mind suddenly. "Come in, Mr. Borland. I'll wake Father up and let you speak to him for a few minutes. But you must promise to make it brief."

"Thanks a lot, Miss Connors. I'm mighty grateful to you."

He followed her down a long, dim hall to the door of a room at the rear of the house. There was no response to the girl's knock, but the deep, rumbling snores of a sleeping man came from within.

She said, "Wait here," and entered the bedroom, closing the door behind her. Presently the snoring broke off and was followed by the low mumble of voices, faintly audible through the thick oaken panels of the door. Then the door opened the girl invited the rancher to come inside.

Captain Connors, sitting up in bed, put a resentful, weary-eyed gaze upon the intruder. He was a large man, close to fifty, with prematurely-silvered hair above a ruddy face.

His eyes were the same cool, clear shade of blue as his daughter's.

"All right, young man," he said, sighing faintly. "My daughter Elaine tells me you've got some questions about the Anders wagon train. Well, fire away. What d'you want to know?"

DANE BORLAND swallowed hard, seemed to be steeling himself. "Captain Connors, I've been trying to find out what happened to a man named Horace Winsett and his wife and daughter."

"Members of the wagon train?"

"They were with the train when it left Nebraska City. That much I know because of a letter Winsett mailed a few days before the train left. His letter said he was making arrangements to join the Anders train if some merchandise he had ordered sent upriver wasn't delayed. He was aiming to open a store when he got the family to the Belle Fourche country. They were coming out from Pennsylvania where we all used to live, to join me where I'd settled a while back."

Connors rubbed his jaw. "These Winsetts," he said thoughtfully. "Relatives of yours?"

"Well—no. Not yet, that is. The daughter Grace and I got engaged back home before I set out to be a cattleman, and we were planning to be married as soon as the family got to the Belle Fourche. That's where my ranch is."

The silvery-haired man frowned. "I'm sorry, young man, but if that girl and her parents were traveling with the Anders wagons, there is no reason to believe they are still alive. So far as is known, there were no survivors."

"Major Hawes told me the same thing. But how can anybody be sure? How can you know some of the wagons didn't get away?"

"For one thing, because of the nature of the terrain where the attack took place." Captain Connors waved his hands in explanatory gestures. "If the attack hadn't come in Whitewater Canyon where the wagons were caught strung out along the narrow trail under the cliffs, the outcome might have been different. But in that narrow trail, there was no chance for the wagons to fort up."

He paused and frowned, a far-away look in his eyes, as though he could see the whole ghastly affair unfolding before him. Then he said slowly, "The entire wagon train was wiped out, and mutilated and burned bodies of men, women, and children were scattered along the trail for more than a mile." He shook his head gravely. "No, young man, you may as well make up your mind that if this Winsett family was with that wagon train, you'll never see any of them again."

Dane's eyes were bleak, but he shook his head stubbornly. "Somehow I can't believe that."

Captain Connors murmured sympathetically, "It's only natural to refuse to admit that something like this could happen to someone we love. But the grim truth is that it can happen, and does happen every day, any will continue to happen as long as this senseless policy of making a treaty with the Indians one day and breaking it the next persists."

Dane said, "I understand from Major Hawes that the dead were brought back to the fort and buried."

"That's right. But most of the bodies were so badly mutilated or charred by fire that only a few could be positively identified."

Dane was frowning now. He asked, "You think there's any chance that some of the wagons might have left the train before the attack? That they might have fallen behind, say?"

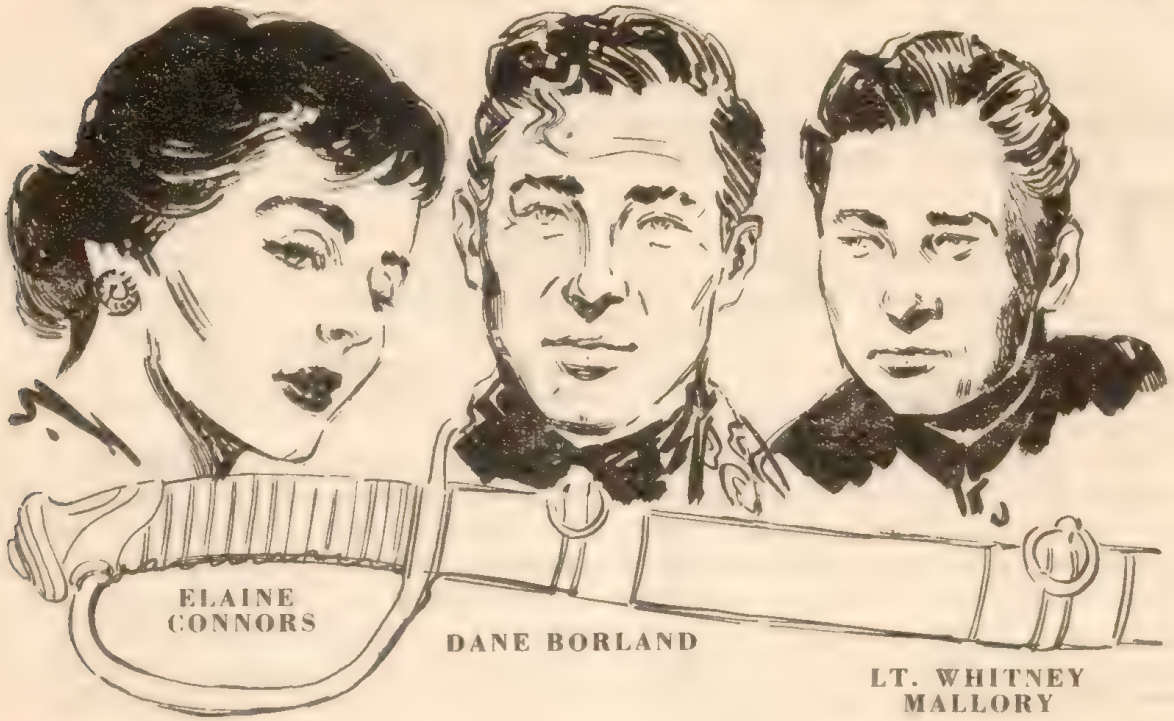
"Not much chance of that. There would have been some word of them b e now."

SILENCE fell in the room. Finally Borland said, in a tone dulled by disappointment, "Well, I reckon I've taken up enough of your time, Captain Connors."

"Just a moment," Elaine said suddenly, a quick excitement in her voice. "Dad, what about Jake Kindle? Maybe he could give Mr. Borland some information."

A faintly startled look came into the officer's face. But after a moment's consideration he said, "Yes, I suppose Kindle might be able to do that—if anybody knew where to find him."

"Jake Kindle?" Dane asked, puzzled. "Who's he?"



"Until he got into trouble about six months ago and was dismissed," said Connors, "he was a civilian scout for the Army. Since then he's been earning his drinking money as a guide, taking wagon trains up the Virginia City trail."

"You think he might know something about the Anders train?"

"He should. He had been hired to guide them."

Astonishment widened Borland's eyes. "But I thought you said there were no survivors."

"Luckily for Kindle he quit the train shortly before the wagons reached Whitewater Canyon. He was here at the post when we brought the news that the Anders party had been wiped out. He claims he and Anders had some disagreement and he'd been paid off. No reason to think he wasn't telling the truth."

A stir of hope was dawning in Dane's gray eyes. "But he'd know if the Winsett wagons were with the train when he left it, wouldn't he?"

"Yes. But I don't think you'll be able to find Jake Kindle to ask him any questions."

Dane stared. "Why not?"

Connors said, "You may as well know. Kindle broke out of the guardhouse where he was being held on charges of killing a trooper named Ames in a drunken brawl in town. No one has seen hide or hair of him since, and my guess is that he's pulled out of this country for good."

Stepping onto the porch a short time later, Dane Borland swung around to take his leave of Elaine Connors. The girl was staring at him with frank curiosity in her blue eyes.

She asked suddenly, "What are you going to do now?"

The rancher shrugged in discouragement. "I wish I knew."

She said, "Of course, Dad was probably right. Your chances of ever finding Jake Kindle are mighty slim. But there is one thing—"

"Yes?"

"There's a man named Frank Yellen who runs the livery stable in town. He's related in some way to Jake Kindle. Perhaps, if you would convince him of your good intentions, he might be able to tell you where to find Jake, or whether he's left the country."

FRANK YELLEN JAKE KINDLE GRACE WINSETT

There were brisk footsteps on the gravel path before the house. There a dapper young man in a lieutenant's uniform was moving toward them, calling out a greeting to the girl. He carried a rather bulky leather instrument case under one arm.

"Why, Whit!" Elaine's face had warmed with sudden pleasure. "You've brought your guitar! How nice!"

The lieutenant grinned a self-assured, slightly arrogant grin. He cut a handsome and dashing figure, and seemed well aware of it. His dark hair was carefully brushed and pomaded, and his features were crisply good-looking.

"Remember, my dear, you have only yourself to blame," he informed her with mock seriousness. "You said the other evening that you were anxious to hear me play and sing, and here I am. Too late to back out."

"I think I'll be able to stand up under it." Elaine laughed. "Oh—this is Mr. Dane Borland. Lieutenant Whitney Mallory."

The lieutenant withdrew his gaze from the girl with evident reluctance, brushed the rancher with a hurried glance and nodded briefly, then turned back to Elaine.

DANE saw her hesitate. He said quickly, "You go right ahead, Miss Connors. I've imposed on you enough as it is. Thanks again for your kindness."

Elaine smiled at him warmly. "Let me know if you have any luck with Yellen. I do hope he can help you."

Lieutenant Mallory, who had moved impatiently to the door, swung around suddenly. For the first time he seemed actually to look at the tall rancher.

"Yellen? What's this about Yellen?" His voice was sharp, and all the humor seemed to have fled from his handsome features.

"You mustn't mind Whit," Elaine apologized to Borland, half humorously. "He and Yellen aren't on the friendliest terms, so mentioning Yellen's name around him is like waving a red shirt in front of a bull."

Mallory frowned. He said nothing, but there was a sharp glitter of irritation in his eyes. Dane Borland was aware, as he took his leave, that the officer was watching him with narrowed eyes and a queer half-masked hostility. He wondered about that, and what it could mean, all the way back from the fort to Banning, a mile north of the fort's gates.

The town of Banning was a dusty, uninspiring collection of frame buildings, mostly saloons, warehouses, and stores. There was a hotel of sorts, a thick-walled abode stagecoach station, and an eating place.

Dane lost no time in seeking out Frank Yellen. The liveryman was short and balding, and his new and rather gaudy yellow suspenders looked out of place against the soiled shirt and patched trousers he was wearing. His face was friendly enough, but some of the friendliness went out of it when he listened to the rancher's plea.

"Mister, you're wasting your time," he replied irritably. "I don't know a thing about where Jake is. He just lit out of here and kept traveling, I reckon."

For ten minutes Dane talked, but Yellen stubbornly insisted that he knew nothing about where Jake Kindle had gone. Yet there was a certain evasiveness about the fellow's manner that convinced Dane Borland that the liveryman was lying.

This was so maddening that, angered, the rancher lost his head. Grabbing the liveryman roughly by the shirt front, he snatched the sixgun from his own holster and jabbed it against the man's ribs.

"I'm sick and tired of your lies, Yellen. Now, for the last time—where is Jake Kindle?"

Yellen's face had turned a doughy color, and he eyed the gun with respect. For a moment he seemed to waver.

Then, with a strange dignity, he said, "Go ahead and shoot, mister. I'm not going to answer your question. Sure, I know where Jake is. But do you think I'd be willing to take a chance on having him caught and brought back here to stand in front of a firing squad or maybe get hung?"

Borland, shaking his head despairingly, released the liveryman and dropped his gun in its holster.

"Sorry I lost my temper," he said, and turned toward the door.

He had almost reached the street when the liveryman's voice stopped him. "Wait a minute, mister."

Dane whirled about. Frank Yellen said, "If I only knew for certain you could be trusted—"

"Yellen, I swear I've told you the truth! There's only one thing I want from Kindle—to find out what he knows about that wagon train. I'm no lawman or bounty hunter. I don't give a damn what Kindle has done."

"Jake Kindle didn't do anything," Yellen cut in harshly. "It wasn't him who killed that Ames trooper. The guilty party—" He broke off suddenly, taking a deep breath. "But never mind that. To get back to what we were talking about—I reckon I can get word to Jake that you want to see him. If he's willing to meet you, arrangements can be made. Of course, this may take a few days."

Dane shook the man's hand, thanked him, and walked out into the street. He headed for the hotel where he had taken a room.

Despite his weariness, he did not sleep well that night. Too many thoughts kept crowding through his brain. He clung tightly to the meager chance that Grace Winsett and her parents were still alive, in spite of all evidence to the contrary. He wondered if he would ever set eyes on Grace's pale, fragile blond beauty again, or look into those cool gray eyes of hers that sometimes were so hard for a man to read.

But time and again another face came to his mental vision—the face of a dark-haired, blue-eyed girl. And each time he found himself thinking of Elaine Connors he experienced an odd sense of guilt, and ruthlessly shut her out of his mind.

IN THE morning he had his breakfast in the hotel dining room, then tramped the streets of the little town restlessly, unhappy about these enforced hours of inactivity. He was a man of action, and the thought of a possible several days to be endured in idle waiting filled him with dread.

He was almost relieved, upon his return to the hotel at noon, to find a message awaiting him from Lieutenant Mallory. The hotel clerk explained that a soldier had brought it in during his absence.

He ripped the envelope open impatiently and let his eyes rove over the boldly written scrawl.

Borland,

It is important that we have a talk as

soon as possible. I will expect you at the post some time this afternoon or evening. Inquire for me from the officer on duty at the gate. Mallory

Dane stared thoughtfully at the note, wondering what lay behind the officer's request. But he welcomed the opportunity of paying another visit to Fort Banning. It wasn't until some time later that he realized, with a faint pang of dismay, that probably the possibility of again seeing Elaine Connors accounted for his eagerness.

When he reached the fort that afternoon he found Lieutenant Mallory directing the setting up of several odd-looking tripod affairs with mirrors mounted on them. A group of soldiers was gathered curiously about each instrument, while Mallory explained how the odd devices worked.

Glancing around and seeing the rancher's watchful gaze upon him, he quickly left the detail in the hands of an eager second lieutenant and walked rapidly toward Borland.

"Glad to see you, Borland," he said briskly. "This shouldn't take long."

He did not offer to shake hands, but led the way quickly into a deserted area between the post hospital and the quartermaster's building.

Dane nodded back in the direction from which they had come. "You mind my asking what those odd-looking contraptions are, Lieutenant? You intend to shine those mirrors into the eyes of the enemy, or what?"

Mallory smiled. "Not exactly. That's merely the U. S. Army's latest signaling device. They call it the heliostat. I've got the job of training some special crews in their operation, in case it should be necessary to employ it against the hostiles. But that's neither here nor there. Borland, I hear you have some personal business with Jake Kindle."

Dane nodded uncertainly. "That may be," he admitted.

To the officer's good-looking face came a look of tight-lipped determination. "You realize, I suppose, that the man's a killer? That he was awaiting trial for murder when he escaped from the post?"

"I know he's been accused of murder," Borland said. "Whether he's guilty or not, I don't know."

"You don't know!" In Lieutenant Mallory's voice was shock and exasperation. "Why, everybody knows he killed Ames! Two men saw him do it. There's no question of his guilt."

Dane shrugged. "What's that got to do with me, Lieutenant?"

Thinly-veiled dislike showed in the officer's eyes. "Borland, I expect you to cooperate with us in bringing this murderer to justice. If you learn where Kindle is hiding out, it's your duty to pass the information along to us. You know, don't you, that you could get into serious trouble if you try to protect a wanted man?"

Dane said patiently, "Lieutenant, I give you my word I don't know where Kindle is hiding. Does that satisfy you?"

Mallory chewed his lip, his expression baffled. "If you did know, would you turn the information over to me?"

The rancher grinned faintly, and shook his head. "Probably not."

An enraged flush mounted into the lieutenant's cheeks. "Damn you, Borland!" he exploded. "I'm warning you here and now that I intend to keep my eye on you. If you're up to what I think you are, you may have reason to be sorry you didn't listen to me."

Dane said, "I'll remember that, Lieutenant. Anything more you wanted to tell me?"

Whit Mallory eyed him with a bleak and open hatred, and for a moment his face no longer was handsome. His fists were clenched, and Dane was half prepared to have the man lunge forward and strike him. But instead, without a word, the lieutenant spun on his heel and stalked away.

DANE was walking back toward the gate when he saw Elaine Connors and her father coming from the direction of the stables. She was wearing a pillbox hat and riding garb. The very sight of her put a sudden tightness across the young cattleman's chest.

He heard her say quickly, "Dad, I want to talk with Mr. Borland for a minute. Do you mind?"

"No. Not at all, my dear." The officer gave Dane a friendly nod and went on towards Officers' Row.

Elaine glanced around with an almost conspiratorial air, then asked in a guarded voice, "Have you seen Frank Yellen? What did he say?"

"There's a chance a meeting with Kindle may be arranged," he told her. "Thanks entirely to you, Miss Connors."

She looked at him with a trace of sadness in her expression. "I hope that girl is unharmed. I know all she must mean to you. And remember—if there's anything I can do, anything at all, I'd be flattered if you'd call on me."

That gave Dane Borland a warm glow which remained with him when he returned to town. It helped him to overcome his restlessness while he waited.

Then one morning he was aroused an hour before dawn by a cautious rapping at the door of his hotel room. He opened it to admit Frank Yellen, who said quickly, "Get into your clothes, Borland. You and I are taking a little ride into the hills this morning."

Feeling a quick surge of elation, Dane dressed with eager haste, then followed Yellen quietly downstairs and along the dark, silent street to the livery barn. By the feeble glow of a lantern he helped the liveryman saddle two horses and lead them from the barn.

Minutes later, the black huddle of buildings fell behind them. They rode across rolling grassland that stretched for miles to the west of town. The sound of the horses' hoofs, the faint creak of saddle leather, even their own steady breathing seemed startingly loud in the pre-dawn hush.

Once, after twenty minutes of riding, Yellen held up his hand, reined in, and cocked his head slightly as though listening. Then, evidently satisfied that they were not being followed, he again urged his horse forward.

AFTER awhile the stars began to pale and a slowly widening band of light sharpened the eastern horizon.

They reached the slope of a low mountain about an hour later. Yellen led the way up a winding draw and drew rein beside a clear, sparkling little stream that snaked across a small meadow. Here they dismounted and breakfasted on bread and cold meat.

"Too bad we can't have any coffee," Yellen apologized. "But it'd be too risky to make a fire. Smoke can be spotted a long way off."

Dane munched thoughtfully on his bread and meat. "Yellen," he said suddenly, "the other day you said that Kindle wasn't responsible for Ames's death."

"That's the truth!"

"But I understand there were two witnesses to the killing, two men who swore that they *saw* Kindle murder the trooper."

"Witnesses, bah!" In Frank Yellen's voice was mingled bitterness and rage. "Who are these witnesses? That rascally Sergeant Welker and that boot-licking Private Kowalski! I wouldn't take their word for it that the sun was shining even if I saw it with my own eyes."

"You think their story wasn't true?"

The liveryman gave a scornful grunt. "They say they were coming up the street late at night and heard two men quarreling. When they got close enough they saw Jake grab up a piece of cordwood and bang that soldier, Ames, across the head with it. What they didn't say was that they'd been waiting for Jake when he stepped out of a saloon where he'd been the whole evening. The three of them had been waiting—Welker, Ames, and Kowalski.

"They rushed him, figuring that at those odds he ought to be an easy beaver to skin. They mighty soon found out different, and one of the troopers—Jake thinks it was Welker—picked up this hunk of wood and swung for Jake's head. But the street was dark, Jake ducked, and Ames caught the blow square on the head. That's what really happened."

Dane was silent briefly, thinking over the man's explanation. "You say the three troopers attacked Kindle? Was it an attempt to rob him?"

Yellen shook his head. "No, it was something else entirely. Jake said that ever since he got back to the fort Welker and the other two had been trying to pick a quarrel with him. After the news came in about the wagon train, they kept making remarks about his being yellow and running away because he knew the Injuns were about to attack the

wagons. It was plain, he said, they were spoiling for a fight."

"Then there had been bad feeling between them and the scout for some time?"

"Not them, no. But Jake figured a certain gent in an officer's uniform put 'em up to it—an old enemy of his. There couldn't be no other explanation. Jake says he hardly knew any of the men, and so far as he could figure they had no reason to hold a grudge against him."

AN IDEA was slowly taking root in Borland's brain. "You say this enemy of his is an officer? Could he, by any chance, be named Mallory?"

Yellen started. "How'd you know that?"

"I saw the lieutenant at the fort day before yesterday. He wanted me to help find out where Kindle was hiding. I thought then that there was something more than devotion to duty behind his eagerness to see Kindle brought back to face a murder charge."

"Reckon you're right about that," Yellen said slowly. "There's no question about how Mallory's feeling is for Jake. It was his doing that Jake got dismissed as an army scout a while back." He shrugged disgustedly and jumped to his feet. "But that's enough of talk. Time we were getting on."

As they started to ride deeper into the hills, the ranchers' attention was drawn to the upper slope of the low mountain ahead. Something seemed to reflect the sun's brilliance for a brief instant, to flicker out, then reappear. This quick series of flashes kept up for several minutes.

Yellen swore softly. "Now what do you figure that was?"

They had reached the crest of one of the lower hills, and Dane, glancing back in the direction of the fort, saw an answering series of flashes.

Suddenly he said, "Reckon I can tell you what that is. It's some new device the army is experimenting with. They call it the heliostat. It's for sending messages."

From time to time, as they moved ahead, they caught the sharp mirror reflections coming again from high up on the mountain. The day grew warmer. Occasionally they halted to rest the horses.

Arriving at the foot of the mountain, they reined off to the north. Another half-hour brought them to a pleasant little valley basin where cottonwoods and willows bordered a quiet stream. As they moved down toward the line of trees a horseman rode out of the timber to meet them.

Dane experienced a mounting tension as the man drew near. Fear and hope fluctuated wildly within him. Jake Kindle was a man in his fifties, lean and leathery-skinned. He was wearing a weather-stained felt hat and a long, fringed buckskin hunting shirt. He held a Henry repeater carelessly across the pommel of his saddle.

He shook hands with Dane and studied him carefully, with eyes as bright and observant as a hawk's. Then he asked bluntly, "What you want to know about the Anders wagon train, young feller? I'd like to help you if I can. Some of your folks with the wagons?"

After he'd listened to Dane's explanation, the scout's eyes narrowed. "Winsett? Sure, I recollect them! Pretty yellow-haired gal? Her pa a fat, fussy little gent?"

Dane's heart sank. "Then they *were* with the train?"

"For a short while only. Winsett and his wagons cut out of the train a few days after we left Nebraska City and joined up with a gent named Cantrell. They didn't say where they was going, but I figured they'd decided to head for the gold camps in the Black Hills. That what you wanted to know?"

IT TOOK a moment or two for the import of the words to sink. Finally Dane Borland said softly, "Thank God."

Borland and Yellen left Kindle a short while later and headed back in the direction of town. On Dane's face was a sober, thoughtful look. Even knowing that Grace and her folks were safe could not keep his mind from dwelling on certain facts that puzzled him. Why had Winsett turned aside from his announced destination? And why had he not sent word back to the Belle Fourche country of his sudden change of plans?

The two men had proceeded only a short distance when the sound of a shot, muffled

by intervening hills, came faintly to their ears. Both men reined up sharply, listening.

There were several more faint reports, then silence.

Frank Yellen's breathing was loud as he sat his saddle tensely, shoulders hunched. Suddenly, growling deep in his throat, he yanked his horse's head around and touched spurs to the animal's flanks. Dane wheeled his own horse, and the two raced back in the direction from which they had come.

They brought their lathered horses to a sudden halt on a knob of high ground. Below them, in a level, treeless valley, they saw a distant huddle of horses and men. Jake Kindle was standing beside his fallen horse. Half a dozen blue-clad cavalrymen, carbines leveled, had him ringed in. Another detail of mounted troopers rode up from a draw at one side of the valley.

The scout, hands bound behind him, was helped to mount up behind one of the troopers. Then the cavalcade moved off in the direction of Fort Banning.

During the ride back to town Frank Yellen was grim-lipped and silent. From time to time his eyes fixed upon Borland with sullen suspicion. It was plain enough that he suspected Dane Borland of having participated in the trap that had been set for Jake Kindle.

It was late afternoon when Borland and Frank Yellen got back to Banning. After supper in the hotel dining room, the rancher stepped onto the porch to enjoy a cigar. Darkness was mantling the shoddy frame structures along the street. From the brightly-lit saloons there was the din of drunken revelry. Blue-coated soldiers from the post drifted up and down the street.

Dane was thinking that, this time tomorrow, he would be on the stage bound for Cheyenne. From that town stages ran regularly to the gold camps. Perhaps in a week he might hold Grace in his arms again.

But somehow that thought didn't seem to stir him as it once would have done. His thoughts drifted back to Jake Kindle. It was nonsense for him to feel as bad as he did about the man's capture. He, Dane, had had nothing to do with that. And yet he couldn't shake off a vague feeling of guilt.

FROM one of the saloons a man emerged and advanced toward the hotel. As he came into the light of the hotel windows, hotel windows, Dane recognized Frank Yellen's short, stocky figure. Yellen came to an abrupt halt at sight of the man on the porch, and a spasm of uncontrollable emotion flitted across his features.

He called out in a whisky-thickened voice, "Mister, come down here! I got something to say to you."

Dane stepped down off the porch. "What is it, Yellen?"

"Think I'm drunk, don't you," snarled the liveryman. His face was darkly flushed and he reeked of cheap whisky. "Well, maybe I am, but I'm not too drunk to know that there was something damn queer about what happened today. Maybe you can explain how those troopers showed up at just the right minute to grab Jake?"

Borland sighed. "You saw that signaling from the mountain," he said. "Well, that's the answer. The heliostat."

Yellen frowned. "You mean those bright flashes we saw? You mean that was how they got Jake?" There was disbelief in his voice.

Dane nodded. "Mallory knew I was trying to arrange a meeting with Kindle. He probably guessed that meeting would be somewhere in the hills. So he posted lookouts with powerful glasses on the mountainside, with orders to relay the position of any riders coming from town. That's how he was able to follow every move we made."

There was a lengthy silence, while the liveryman seemed to consider Dane's words. "That's what you'd like me to believe, isn't it?" he said finally.

"You don't think that's how it happened?"

"Maybe. But that's not the whole story. Mallory needed somebody to bait his trap. So he sent you to me with some trumped-up story about these people with the wagon train. You probably knew all the time that they had left the wagons long before the Injun attack. Borland, I think you're a lying, white-livered coyote! How much did that lieutenant pay you for tricking me?"

"You're too drunk to think straight, Yellen," Dane said quietly. "Why don't you go home?"

"Too drunk to think straight, eh?" Yellen burst out. "Well, we'll see if I'm too drunk to shoot straight!" He snatched a sixgun from his belt, whipped it up, and pulled the trigger.

Dane felt the burn of lead as the bullet creased his neck. He threw himself forward quickly, gripped Yellen's wrist before he could fire again, put the full force of his shoulders into a blow that jarred the other man's head back, and sent him sprawling backward into the street.

The gun had fallen at Yellen's feet, Borland bent down to pick it up. He stared down at the stunned, unmoving figure of the liveryman, fighting down the fierce blaze of anger that the man's unexpected attack had kindled within him. He emptied the sixgun of bullets, flung them viciously into the black shadows between two buildings, dropped the weapon in the dust beside Frank Yellen, and went back into the hotel.

AT NOON the next day the stage left for Cheyenne, whirling southward out of town in a smother of slow-settling dust. But somewhat to his own surprise, Dane Borland was not one of the passengers. He watched it depart, standing in the doorway of the big mercantile store across from the stage station.

As it disappeared, he turned to the corpulent, cheery-faced man behind the counter and engaged him in lengthy conversation. The storekeeper was a talkative man, fond of gossip and rumor. Once Dane had managed to introduce the names of Sergeant Welker and Private Kowalski, he learned some interesting facts.

Neither man was favorably thought of by the businessmen in town. Welker was a big, red-faced bully with a fondness for hard liquor and poker. This kept him woefully short of cash, except on payday.

Kowalski, on the other hand, was inclined to be tight-fisted and niggardly. But he had been cursed with a burning ambition to rise in the ranks, an urge so strong that Welker was able to use it to wheedle from him an occasional loan for drinking money. Kowalski eagerly awaited the day when he could sew a corporal's chevrons onto his sleeve.

Both men, the storekeeper explained candidly, were hotheads and trouble-makers. When they were drunk they could become ugly customers. He advised Dane to have as little to do with them as possible.

That evening, however, Dane made his way to the saloons that had been described as Welker's favorite hangouts and inquired for him, but without success. Coming out of one saloon, he saw a glum-faced trooper leaning against an awning post, gazing enviously at other soldiers who were going through the swinging doors. He had the air of a man whose pockets were empty, but whose thirst was strong.

Dane asked him, "You know Sergeant Welker, soldier?"

"Welker? Sure I know him." Something in his tone indicated a decided lack of enthusiam for the sergeant.

"You happen to know if he's in town this evening?"

"I haven't seen him. But he'll show up before the evening's over. He always does."

"It'd be worth five dollars to me to get word to him that someone wants to see him at the hotel on a matter that might prove highly profitable to him."

The trooper's face brightened. "I'll get word to the sergeant, sir, if I have to drag him out of the barracks back at the post."

It was nearly nine o'clock before Dane heard the heavy clumping of boots in the hall, followed by a loud rapping of knuckles against his door. He threw the door wide and saw his messenger and another uniformed man standing in the hall.

Sergeant Welker, burly, thick-necked, with ruddy features and heavy black brows above beady, unfriendly eyes, strode into the room and waited impatiently while Dane paid the trooper who had brought him.

After the man had departed and Dane had closed the door, Welker demanded roughly, "What's this business you want to see me about, mister?"

"Sergeant Welker, how'd you like to earn five hundred dollars?"

Greed suddenly flickered in the trooper's eyes, but as quickly vanished. He stared with a hard and probing sharpness, wariness and faint distrust on his face.

"Earn five hundred dollars, you say? What you mean by that?"

"It'll be the easiest money you've ever earned in your life. Just half a dozen lines written on a piece of paper and the money's yours."

Welker's thick black brows furrowed. "Mister, exactly what is it you want from me?" he asked gruffly.

Dane said, "Sergeant, I want you to change your story of what happened on the night Private Ames was killed."

A glimmer of hostility appeared in the sergeant's beady eyes. "So that's it! You want to keep Jake Kindle from getting what's coming to him? Well, Trooper Ames was a friend of mine, and I'm not —"

"You know as well as I do Kindle didn't break Ames's skull."

"What's that?" Welker shot him a quick glance, but Borland saw alarm and uneasiness in his narrowed eyes. "Where'd you get that idea?"

"Now tell the truth, Sergeant. Jake said Ames was killed by accident and that Kowalski struck the blow. Isn't that right?"

The ruddy-faced trooper didn't say anything for a while. He seemed to be thinking it over, considering it from every angle.

Finally he said, "You mean you want me to sign a paper saying Kowalski killed Ames, but that it was an accident? And you'll give me five hundred dollars for doing it?"

"That's exactly what I mean."

"But how will I explain what I said before, that Kindle was the killer?"

"You can say that you wanted to protect Kowalski. But since the whole thing *was* an accident, you can't see an innocent man hang for a murder he didn't commit."

"Yeah, I could say that, couldn't I?" A gleam had come into Sergeant Welker's beady eyes. Dane sensed contempt for a civilian, and amusement at some private joke known only to the sergeant himself. "You got that five hundred here?" he asked.

Borland took a thick roll of bills from his pocket and laid them in a neat pile on the bureau.

"Sure, mister, I'll do it!" Welker said suddenly, a sly grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. "You got pen and paper?"

Dane produced these also, and the sergeant began to write industriously. Finally he handed over the results of his labors.

"That what you want?"

Dane looked it over quickly. "I reckon it'll do. Now sign your name, and you'll have the money."

Welker scrawled his name at the bottom of the page. After he'd carefully counted the money, he grinned insolently and left.

The rancher stood staring down at the piece of paper in his hand. In itself, as a means of clearing Jake Kindle of the charges against him, it was of dubious value. Welker had only to say that he had been forced to write at the point of a gun, or that he had been too drunk to know what he was doing. Dane was convinced that was exactly what he intended to do.

And yet Dane Borland was playing a hunch that the paper might be worth the money he had paid for it. He would know better after he'd had a talk with Private Kowalski. He left his room and went hunting in various saloons for Kowalski.

KOWALSKI, Borland saw when he located him half an hour later in a small and dirty cantina, was a pale bony-faced man with shifty, nervous eyes and a small reddish-blond mustache.

Dane went up to him. "Private Kowalski?"

"Sure, I'm Kowalski. What do you want?"

"I understand you're a friend of Sergeant Welker's?"

"Yeah, I'm a friend of his. What of it?"

"I wonder if he's a friend of yours."

"What the hell do you mean by that?" Anger lent sharpness to the man's voice.

Dane asked, "You recognize Welker's handwriting when you see it?"

"Of course."

"Then read this." Dane held out the statement he had obtained from Welker.

As Kowalski read, a stunned look came into his face. For a moment or two after he had finished reading he kept staring down at the paper in his hand. Then lifted enraged, fever-bright eyes, trying to control the trembling on his lips.

"That sneaking, two-faced — Mister, that's a lie! I didn't bust Ames across the

head—it was that dirty, lying sergeant himself who did it!"

"Just the same, that confession of Welker's is going to make things look pretty bad for you. Unless —"

"Unless what?" Worry had appeared now in Kowalski's pale eyes.

"Unless you go to Major Hawes and tell him the truth. In that case I wouldn't have to turn over Welker's confession to him. All I want is to get Jake Kindle free."

Kowalski hesitated for a moment longer. Then he said, "That's just what I'm going to do! Nobody's going to saddle me with a killing I didn't have anything to do with."

It was only a short time, then, before Major Hawes listened to Kowalski's story. At the conclusion of the confession, the major directed that Jake Kindle be brought from the guardhouse.

"Kindle," he said, "I'm taking the responsibility of turning you loose. Thanks to Private Kowalski's belated attack of conscience, there's no longer any case against you."

A dozen warriors streamed after the stage in fierce pursuit.

AT NOON the next day, Dane Borland had taken his place in the Cheyenne-bound Concord before he noticed the girl and the army officer standing in the throng of spectators on the walk in front of the adobe-walled stage station. Elaine Connors was smiling up into the handsome face of her companion, Lieutenant Whit Mallory, and chatting gaily.

Even then Dane did not realize that Elaine was to be a fellow passenger on the stage.

That truth burst upon him only when Elaine and Mallory hastily kissed, and he conducted her to the side of the coach to help her climb aboard. She was hardly more than settled in her seat before the stage got under way, rumbling down the dusty street between the shabby buildings.

When she caught sight of Dane Borland seated facing her, she started, and sudden color flushed her cheeks. "Why, Mr. Borland, I didn't know you were traveling on this coach!"

He experienced the queer tingle in his veins that the presence of this girl had always produced. "I might say exactly the same thing about you," he pointed out, grinning. "Anyhow, this is a pleasant surprise. Are you making the trip to Cheyenne, too?"

Elaine nodded. "Yes. Dad's been promising me a shopping trip to Cheyenne for a long time. A girl doesn't feel that life is worth living unless she can buy a new dress now and then."

As the stage followed the wagon road southward the two talked quietly. The other passengers, both men, remained silent dozing most of the time.

Twice during the afternoon the stage halted briefly to change horses. It was nearly dusk when the vehicle drew up before a small hotel and eating place at Powder Rock, a modest huddle of buildings against the evening sky. Here they were to wait over until morning.

In his room on the second floor of the hotel that night, Dane found that sleep was long in coming. He lay thinking of the army girl, unable to banish her loveliness from his mind. And yet, all the while, in the back of his mind lay a feeling of disloyalty and guilt. He tried to summon up the picture of Grace Winsett as he had last seen her, but her face was vague and ghostly, and she seemed far away and remote.

As last, despairing of getting any rest, he arose and went to the open window. He had been aware of a child's wailing, and now he saw lamp light in one of the windows of a small shack down the street. After a while the crying became the shrill screaming of a baby in pain.

In a little while he heard the sound of quiet footsteps on the stairs. The front door downstairs opened and closed, and a shadowy figure crossed the street and rapped softly at the door of the lighted shack.

He stared in surprise as the opening door flung a shaft of brightness against the night, outlining Elaine Connor's graceful figure. She stepped through the doorway, and again the street was dark. The sick child continued to wail for a while longer, then quieted.

WHEN Elaine left the shack a few minutes later, Dane was waiting for her in the darkness of the street. She made a little half-frightened sound, then released her breath suddenly as she recognized him.

"Mr. Boland, is that you? For a moment, I thought —"

"Yes, it's me." He gave a faint chuckle of amusement. "Do you go about often at night looking after other folks' sick babies?"

"I suppose it must seem rather odd to you. But I've had a lot of experience doctoring the children at the post. Anyhow, when a baby screams like that it can mean something serious, and out here so many people can't afford to pay doctor bills. So I thought —"

"You don't need to apologize," he broke in. "I think what you did was fine. The world would be a better place to live in if more people were helpful and kind."

He halted abruptly, as though he feared he had said too much. A brief silence fell between them.

Presently Elaine said, "I never expected to find you walking around in the street. Did the baby's crying disturb you?"

"No, I've just got a restlessness in me tonight that won't let me sleep."

"I'm not sleepy, either," she said.

She fell in beside him and they walked along the road leading south from town. About a quarter of a mile beyond the cluster of buildings they came to a bridge across a narrow stream, and paused to stare down into the inky blackness of the water.

Elaine said suddenly, "You've never told me about your ranch on the Belle Fourche. What is it like?"

He grinned a little. "From a cattleman's point of view, it's a sort of paradise on earth.

Plenty of good, sweet-tasting water, the finest grass in the world for fattening beef, and hills and timber to shelter them in the winter. Of course, the ranch house and barns aren't much to look at. The house is built of logs, and the furniture in it is mostly home made. But it's big and substantial, and when there's a fire roaring in the big fireplace and a blizzard is howling outside, I wouldn't trade it for any place in the world."

"I've often wondered how it would be to have a place of one's own," she said, with a trace of wistfulness. "In the army, nobody ever knows how long he's going to stay in one place."

Clouds suddenly parted to let pale moonlight spill down upon them. It bathed the girl's face in silvery loveliness, and Dane suddenly found his heart pounding.

He was not at all clear how it happened. All he knew was that suddenly Elaine was in his arms, and that he was kissing her. He was surprised to find that her arms clung tightly to him, and that she was returning his kiss. But a moment later she broke from his embrace, turning her face away.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I don't know what made me do that."

"Shall we go back to the hotel?" she asked in a dry, squeezed-out voice.

THEY walked in silence for a short while. Then Borland said, "I don't blame you for being angry. I had no right to do that."

"I'm not angry," she said quickly. "At least, if I am, I'm not angry at you, but at myself. You see —" she darted a quick glance up into his face — "I wanted you to kiss me. I would have been disappointed if you hadn't. Not a nice thing for a girl to have to admit, is it—especially a girl who is about to be married?"

Dane had halted abruptly. "I didn't know you were going to be married," he said slowly. "Is the lucky man Lieutenant Mallory?"

She nodded. "Whit's been after me to set the date for some time now. So I finally told him I'd marry him after I got back from this trip to Cheyenne."

Dane said, "I hope you and the lieutenant will be very happy, Miss Connors."

Again there was a silence between them, and it held until they had nearly reached the hotel. Then Elaine broke it.

"Dane, I hope you aren't blaming yourself too much for what happened back there. Moonlight can make a man and woman give way to foolish impulses sometimes. Besides, it wasn't really me you were kissing. It was the girl of the wagon train. And maybe I thought I saw Whit Mallory's face when I looked at you."

He swung around suddenly to face her. "Elaine, I want you to know—"

"Hush." She put her fingers lightly against his lips. "Don't say it, Dane. Don't you know it wouldn't really be you talking anyway? It would be the moon and the night shadows and the softness of the wind on your face. And in the morning you would regret it."

Before he had a chance to say anything more, she darted away, faded into the shadows in the dark bulk of the hotel. He could hear her swift, light steps on the hotel stairs, then silence. For a long time he stood outside the building, filled with a sharp, bitter sense of loss. Then slowly he stepped onto the porch, entered the lobby and climbed the stairs to his room.

They reached Cheyenne the next day, and the day following Dane Borland boarded another stage headed for the gold fields. A month later, in a place called Lode City, one of the numerous boom towns scattered through the hills, he stood unobserved amid a throng of flannel-shirted miners, and watched a shiny new rig pull up before the Bonanza Hotel.

A big, handsomely-dressed man stepped down and helped a pretty blond woman to alight. As they swept grandly across the walk and entered the hotel before the awed spectators, Dane stared after them in startled disbelief.

He questioned a miner standing beside him, who told him the man was Lucky Jack Cantrell.

"And believe me, mister," the miner said, "that nickname sure fits! He hadn't been in these parts more'n a month before he invested in a pair of mining properties that turned out to be the biggest producers hereabouts. Since then he's got hold of a heap

more property. Why, most of the stores and saloons in town are owned outright by him, or else he's got an interest in 'em. Yep, Lucky Jack is a big frog in this pond, mister."

DANE'S mouth felt dry. "You happen to know anything about the girl with him?"

The man cackled. "Pretty, isn't she? Well, if you got any ideas, mister, you might as well forget 'em. She's Lucky Jack's girl. I don't know her name, but he met her while he was in Nebraska City a while back. Brought her and her folks back with him. Set up the old man in a store of his own here in town."

"You remember if the man's name was Winsett?"

"Yep, I believe that could be his name. If you want to know for sure, take a look at the sign on that big new store in the next block."

"Just one thing more. You say that blonde is Cantrell's girl. Do you mean he aims to marry her?"

The miner chuckled. "I wouldn't go that far. A man like Lucky Jack—well, he doesn't like to get himself tied down. Maybe he's told this girl he intends to marry her, but that's a heap of difference from actually standing up before a preacher."

At the hotel desk, Dane learned the number of Grace Winsett's room. He climbed the stairs to the upper story, rapped on the door, and heard quick footsteps cross the room.

Grace threw open the door, and an incredulous look flashed over her delicate, creamy-skinned face. Her gray eyes widened slowly. For a moment she seemed unable to say a word.

He broke the silence. "Hello, Grace. Surprised to see me?"

She swallowed and forced a tremulous smile. "Why Dane, how did you ever—"

"How did I ever find you? Was that what you were going to ask?"

"Of course it wasn't," she replied hastily. "Dane, I hardly know what to say. This—this must seem dreadfully strange to you—Papa and the rest of us being here in Lode City; I mean."

He nodded. "It does. Do you realize that I was afraid you and your folks were dead?"

The blond girl bit her lip, a faint flush coloring her cheeks. "It was awful of Papa not to let you know about our change of plans. I pleaded with him to write you and tell you what happened, but he insisted it was better to leave matters as they were."

"I see," Dane said slowly. "You decided you didn't want to go through with our marriage plans, and you thought it would be easier on me if I believed you'd been victims of the Indian attack. Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

"Well—," she said hesitantly—"something like that. You see, while we were in Nebraska City Papa met a man named Cantrell. He told Papa that his stock of store goods would be worth five times as much in the gold fields, and he promised to help set him up.

HE LOOKED at her sharply. "So it was simply a matter of your father's business prospering? I thought it was a a matter of our getting married. I thought that was what was bringing you to the Belle Fourche country."

"You make it sound so dreadful!" She halted, a touch of defiance in her eyes. "Dane, I won't have you blaming me for what happened. It was all Papa's fault. I wouldn't have dreamed of coming here if Papa—and think of what would have happened if we had stayed with the wagon train!"

He stared at her in silence. At last he asked, "What about this Lucky Jack? You aim to marry him?"

Again color rose in the girl's face. Her eyes avoided his. "I don't know, Dane. He wants me to, but I'm not sure I love him."

"Surely you're not going to let a little thing like that stand in your way?" In Dane's voice was a touch of bitterness. "After all, the man owns two of the best mining properties in these hills. He can probably make your father a rich man."

"Dane, you have no right to talk to me that way!" she flared.

"I'm sorry, Grace. I shouldn't have said that. After all, it would have been worse if you had found out you didn't love me after we were married."

He turned then to leave the room, but she said, "Dane, wait!"

"What is it, Grace?"

She moved close to him. "Dane, aren't you going to wish me luck and maybe give me a good-bye kiss, for old times' sake?"

"Sure, Grace. I wish you all the luck in the world. As for the kiss—"

He caught her in a mild embrace and put his lips to hers. But, surprisingly, she chose to make more of it than a perfunctory gesture. She pressed her body tightly against his, and her lips were warm and ardent.

When he released her they were both breathing a little faster. She stepped back, looking up at him with an odd brightness in her face.

"Dane," she said, "I've made a dreadful fool of myself. If only I had refused to listen to Papa!"

"Are you trying to say—"

"I don't know what I'm trying to say, Dane! I'm all mixed up. But I do know I'm not happy here in Lode City. Jack Cantrell made a lot of promises, but after we got here —" Her voice trailed off.

She was gazing up at him with expectant eyes, as though waiting for him to speak. When he remained silent, she added, a note of disappointment in her voice, "But I suppose it's too late to think of that now, isn't it, Dane? You never could forgive me for what happened, could you?"

He frowned. "If I thought you really meant that—"

"But Dane, I do, I swear I do!" Her eagerness was intense. "I know now I never have stopped loving you. If you want me to come with you to the Belle Fourche and become your wife, all you have to do is say so."

For a moment he hesitated. Then he took a long breath and said, "All right, Grace. I'm taking the Cheyenne stage out of here in the morning. Be at the stage station with your bags packed."

A moment later, descending the hotel stairs, he wondered if she would show up at the stage station next day. She had made a fool of him once, and there was no reason why she should not do so again. Yet the thought left him calm, almost indifferent. Somehow it was not important.

WHEN the stage departed from Lode City the following morning, though, Grace Winsett was aboard. Yet Dane could not help but notice a certain tension that showed in her eyes, and in the strained look at the corners of her mouth.

For an hour they rolled steadily onward. The Concord threaded its way through the hills, swinging up steep grades, swerving around the shoulders of rocky buttes, occasionally dropping into some deep gorge that rang with the sound of a roaring, swift-rushing mountain stream. Then three horsemen overtook the lurching vehicle and galloped alongside it, shouting loudly at the driver. The man on the box hauled his horses to a stop.

The whisky drummer on the back seat began to swear in a startled voice. Then, suddenly remembering the girl, he hastily mumbled an apology. The stage driver swung down from his box and called to the passengers, "Nothing to get scared about, folks. This isn't a holdup, just a short wait for someone to get here."

But despite the drummer's angry demands to know the reason for the delay, the driver refused to elaborate further.

Within fifteen minutes, Lucky Jack Cantrell drove up in his fancy rig. He reined in his matched pair of well-lathered bays, jumped down, and quickly stepped over to the halted stage. He peered in at the girl, a faint chagrin showing in his eyes.

"So you *were* serious, Grace? I thought you were just trying to bluff me."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Grace said stiffly.

Cantrell shifted his gaze to Dane Borland, his eyes hostile. "So this is the gent you were throwing me over for, eh, simply because he's agreeable to standing up in front of a parson and I'm not? Seems like a mighty poor reason for running away. But if it's so important, come on back and we'll get married."

After a brief hesitation, Grace climbed out of the stage coach. Dane watched with a curious sense of detachment. He felt no anger at either Grace or the man who had come for her. If anything he felt relieved that everything had turned out as it had.

He watched Cantrell deposit Grace Winsett on the leather seat of the buggy. Three riders, apparently Cantrell's men, clustered nearby, ready to escort the vehicle triumphantly back to town.

Lucky Jack, instead of mounting the seat beside Grace and driving off, walked back to the stagecoach and halted beside it.

He called to Dane in a loud voice, "Mister, step down here a minute, will you?"

Dane complied. Standing before Lucky Jack, he asked, "What is it, Cantrell?"

"I don't ever want to see you in Lode City again. Understand that? And just so you won't forget—"

THE look in the man's eyes warned Dane. He managed to avoid the fist thrown viciously and squarely at his jaw, a punch that would have knocked him flat had it landed. The mine owner's knuckles raked his cheek painfully, but did no other damage. In one quick move, he stepped in, threw both hands to his assailant's face, and had the satisfaction of seeing him sprawl backward into the dirt.

Lucky Jack scrambled quickly to his feet though, a wild, raging anger on his face. "I'm going to take you apart for that!" he growled.

Dane retreated from his furious rush, ducking under murderous swings that would have torn his head off. As he danced away, he jarred Cantrell's head back with short, accurate punches.

But this only slowed Lucky Jack, and did not halt him. When one of his wide, flailing blows crashed through the rancher's fending elbows, it struck Borland's jaw with force enough to send him down.

Cantrell aimed a kick at his fallen foe's head. But Dane, though badly dazed, still retained enough sense to roll instinctively out of the patch of the swinging boot. Thoroughly angered himself now, he lurched to his feet, planted himself firmly, and waited for the mine owner to rush again.

Cantrell moved in, his eyes watchful. But this time, instead of retreating, Dane stepped in himself. He pivoted the full strength of his wiry body and smashed his fist against the other's mouth.

Cantrell staggered and fell, and this time he did not get up. His face was a smear of crimson and the back of his once spotless coat was grimy with dirt and powdered dust.

Not until Dane had resumed his place in the stagecoach did he glance around. The three men beside the buggy had dismounted and were conversing in low tones, their sullen eyes turned in Dane's direction. Grace Winsett had jumped down and was kneeling solicitously beside Lucky Jack Cantrell.

The stage rolled into Cheyenne at dusk two days later. Dane immediately tried to get a reservation on the first stage for the north.

The clerk frowned slightly as he said, "I can sell you a seat for tomorrow's stage, but I'm not sure if it'll do you much good."

"What do you mean?"

"Haven't you heard the talk around town? They're saying Red Cloud and his braves have hit the warpath again. They're raiding the stage stations and killing ranchers up along the Bozeman."

"You mean there's a chance tomorrow's stage may be held up?"

The man nodded. "A good chance—if the rumors are true. Mister, I don't know what to tell you. Everything is up in the air right now."

Dane started to turn away in annoyance. But then he swung back suddenly to face the clerk, and fired a question at him. The clerk answered it promptly.

"A Miss Connors? Yes, I remember her. She left for the north a little over two weeks ago. You needn't be worried about her, sir. That was before this trouble started."

DANE thanked the clerk and stepped out into the dark street to hunt a place to sleep. His relief at knowing Elaine Connors was safe was as vast as the night itself. His thoughts lingered on the blue-eyed army girl.

Suddenly angered at himself, he swore softly. Why did he insist on torturing himself by thinking of that girl? By this time she undoubtedly was Lieutenant Mallory's bride. Dane Borland *had* to forget her.

When no further alarming news had reached the division agent by morning, he

decided to let the stage proceed on its scheduled trip northward. A heavily-armed shotgun guard took his place beside the stage driver. Dane and two other men, both armed, climbed inside the Concord, and the horses moved off.

Dane's fellow travelers were a taciturn army contractor on his way to Fort Banning, and a mild-mannered young man named Howland, freshly from the East, eager to join his brother at Virginia City.

They reached Powder Rock shortly after mid-day, paused for a brief meal, then pushed on swiftly. Several hours later, when they reached the first of the swing stations between Powder Rock and Fort Banning, they discovered a small wagon train drawn up beside the corrals a short distance from the main buildings.

As the three stage passengers descended to stretch their legs, one of the men near the wagons called Dane's name and hurried across the yard. A wide grin was on his lean, leathery face.

"Jake Kindle!" exclaimed Dane, gripping the outstretched hand. "What are you doing here?"

Jake Kindle jerked his thumb toward the wagons. "Party of mining men in a sweat to get to the new diggings up around Virginia City. I hired on as a scout and guide for 'em."

Dane eyed the men around the wagons. "How many in the party?" he asked.

"Seven men and four wagons."

"Kind of a small bunch to be heading up the trail right now, isn't it?"

"You mean with Red Cloud and his warriors stirring things up?" The scout nodded. "Exactly what I told 'em. I advised 'em to camp here until some good-sized bunch of wagons came along, and then join it. But I'm not sure they aim to take my advice. We've been camped here only since last evening and already some of the gents are getting a mite impatient. Seem to figure it's more important to get to Montana before all the gold is dug than to keep their hair fastened onto the tops of their heads."

Jake had been peering at the other passengers and at the stage. Finally he asked, "What about that yellow-haired gal you wanted to find? Ever catch up with her?"

"I did. But things didn't turn out the way I expected."

Jake shook his head sadly. "They hardly ever do, son. What happened?"

"She's going to marry another man."

THAT was as far as they got before the stage driver called out a warning from the box. As soon as the passengers had resumed their seats the stage whirled off down the road.

Ten minutes later they passed over a low rise, and the stage station was hidden from sight. Now, to the left of the stage road, taller hills, barren and timberless, lifted gauntly against the cloudless blue of the afternoon sky.

Young Howland, who had been peering intently at the jutting upthrust of one of the hills, narrowing his eyes against the glare of the westering sun, suddenly stiffened in his seat. A startled exclamation burst from his lips and he stabbed an excited finger at an upper slope of the hill.

"Look there—on top of that hill! Isn't something moving up there?"

Dane looked swiftly where the other pointed. On the brow of the hill, looking small in the distance, war-bonneted horsemen had appeared. As Dane caught sight of them they were joined by others moving up across the crest of the hill. They kept coming until he estimated that three score Sioux were in sight.

"Seems to be a sizable war party," he said grimly. "Let's hope there are no more waiting up the road to cut us off."

That the stage driver was also aware of the menace on the hilltop became immediately apparent. Cracking his whip and yelling shrilly to the leaders, he urged his team to a faster run. The Concord began to rock and swing wildly on its leather thoroughbraces as the horses lunged forward.

With the stage in full flight, a dozen or more warriors broke off from the main body of horsemen, and swept recklessly down the steep slope. Their ponies—calicos and pintos mainly—thundered down the road in minutes after the stage had passed, and streamed out in fierce pursuit.

A Winchester, roaring from the stage's box, began to slam reports above the rumble of wheels and the pound of hoofs. Dane, gun in hand, poked his head out the window. He squinted carefully along the barrel and began to pull the trigger, spacing his shots deliberately.

Both young Howland and the army contractor were blazing away too, filling the interior of the coach with crashing sound and the harsh stench of gunpowder.

With considerable satisfaction Dane saw that several of the ponies galloping at the stage's rear were now riderless. But other brown-skinned warriors came on, crouching low over the necks of their straining ponies, yelling fiercely as they narrowed the distance between them and the fleeing stagcoach.

Sioux rifles began to crackle, and bullet holes appeared in the coach's paneling. The contractor cursed suddenly, and his gun clattered to the floor. When his companions darted quick looks at him they saw that he was holding onto a bloodied, bullet-torn right sleeve just above the elbow.

"Don't mind me," he said hastily. "I can shoot just as well with my left hand." He stooped down, picked up his gun, and began firing out the window again.

The thunder of pursuing hoofs swelled alarmingly as the Sioux drew nearer, and the yelling attained a fresh crescendo of fierceness and rage. Then the galloping horsemen drew even with the swift-flying stage.

HASTILY reloading, Dane snapped quick shots at Sioux riders so close to the plunging Concord it seemed he could reach out and touch them. A leveled rifle barrel spat flame almost in his face. He fired again, and saw a painted warrior throw up his arms and tumble backwards over the rump of his pony.

Then all at once, and for no apparent reason, the confused mingling of gunfire, yells, and pounding hoofs diminished, seemed to fade. A final salvo of shots came from the pursuing warriors. They slowed their ponies and swung away.

Young Howland grinned. "We beat them off," he crowed. "They've had enough!"

Dane shook his head, puzzled. Then suddenly he became aware of a funnel of dust lifting above the stage road to the north, and enlightenment broke over him.

"You want to know why those Indians decided to give up the chase?" he asked. "Then take a look up the road ahead."

Howland and the contractor twisted around and stared up the road with startled eyes. A crestfallen look on his face, Howland said, "Troopers! And I thought—"

Out of the smother of dust ahead a column of blue-uniformed riders was galloping to meet the stage. As the cavalry detachment swept closer, Dane fixed his gaze on the officer, mounted on a magnificent, hard-running sorrel, who rode at their head.

Something in the jaunty set of the man's shoulders, in the arrogant lift of his chin, struck Dane as being familiar. As the officer drew near enough to be recognized, Dane's last doubts were dispelled. It was Lieutenant Mallory.

As the stage halted, the lieutenant swung his white-gloved hand aloft. The men reined in and stood restlessly waiting while the officer spoke to the stage driver.

"Was that gunfire I heard a while back?"

"Sure was, Lieutenant," said the driver. "A bunch of Sioux have been hanging on our tail for the last couple of miles. Don't mind telling you I was right glad to see—" He broke off with a startled oath. "Listen, lieutenant! Isn't that—"

Then Dane heard it, too—a faint crackling sound like the breaking of many small twigs. It seemed to come from directly south of them.

"It's that war party! They're attacking the station! Figure to run off the horses and kill whoever's around, damn their bloodthirsty souls!"

Mallory stared southward, a frown on his handsome face. "How large a group of hostiles did you say were chasing you?"

"I reckon there was a dozen or more, Lieutenant. But they were only a part of a bigger war party we saw. There must have been fifty or sixty of 'em in all."

The lieutenant took a moment or two to make up his mind. Then he spoke to the driver again. "I can't spare any men for escort duty. That means you'll have to turn

around and come back with us. Keep to the rear and you'll be safe enough."

"Just as you say, Lieutenant."

BLUE lines of horsemen stirred into movement and swept southward along the road at a pounding gallop. Swinging around in a half circle, the stage brought up the rear, moving through the thick, choking haze of dust lifted by the thudding hoofs of the cavalrymen's mounts.

The sound of firing grew louder. Mingled with it, and now clearly audible, was a savage uproar—the shrill, dog-like barking of battle-crazed warriors. Then the stage was rolling over the last low rise north of the stage station behind the charging cavalry.

Dane had a confused impression of galloping men, cracking carbines, sabers glinting in the sun. Then the Indian attackers wheeled their ponies and fled. They vanished over a low ridge to the west, with eager troopers in pursuit.

The stage was standing before the station, surrounded by a crowd of miners and stage-line employees, by the time the cavalrymen began drifting back across the ridge. Within five minutes Lieutenant Mallory, with the last of the troops, rode up.

He had reined in the sorrel beside the halted stage before he caught sight of Jake Kindle in the crowd, with Dane standing at the scout's side. His face stiffened and his brows drew together. He half opened his mouth to speak, then clamped his lips tightly. He stared sullenly at the two men, then turned to the non-commissioned officer at his elbow.

"Sergeant Hillis," he directed curtly, "have the men dismount and water their horses. We'll remain here for ten minutes."

But before the ten minutes were up, a trooper posted on the high ground west of the station had put spurs to his mount and come racing in.

"They're coming back, sir," he reported. "And there must be a couple of hundred of 'em!"

Lieutenant Mallory chewed his lip in annoyance. Then he glanced at the low ridge to the west and gave a little nod, as though having reached some decision.

"Sergeant Hillis," he said fiercely, "I intend to give these filthy savages a lesson in military strategy. You will take twenty men and ride south to the protection of that clump of timber. I shall take the rest of B Troop and retire behind the hill to the north. At the proper time we shall attack, hitting the foe on either flank and smashing him. The signal to attack will be the firing of three quick shots without a pause. Is that clear, Sergeant?"

Before the sergeant had a chance to reply, Jake Kndle moved out of the huddle of miners, passengers and stage-line employees gathered in the station yard.

"Wait a minute, Lieutenant!" he called sharply. "Could I say something?"

MALLORY drew himself up, a dark flush in his cheeks. His eyes, when he looked at Kindle, were as cold as a reptile's.

"Frankly, I'm not much interested in your opinions, Kindle," he grated harshly. "But go ahead. Say whatever you've got to say."

"I may not know much about military tactics and such," drawled the scout, "but I've seen a heap of Injun fighting in my time, and I do know the Sioux pretty well. Mind if I offer a word of advice?"

It was evident from the look on Lieutenant Mallory's face that he minded very much. But he merely said impatiently, "All right. Let's have it."

"If I were in your boots, Lieutenant, I'd turn the horses into the stables and do my fighting from behind the logs in these buildings. There's nothing an Injun hates to do more'n charge a well-defended fixed position."

"I thought that would be your advice," Mallory said sneeringly. "Then you think there's something wrong with the tactic I outlined?"

"Only thing wrong with it," said the scout, "is that you haven't got the men to pull it off. You heard what Trooper Barden said about there being maybe a couple hundred Sioux out there? Forty men won't stand a chance against a war party that big; they'll be hacked to pieces. Believe me, Lieutenant, I know!"

The officer regarded him in silence for a moment. "I seem to recollect that this isn't the first time you've presumed to advise West Point graduates on the art of making war, Kindle. However, I prefer to trust to my own judgment as to the proper way of dealing with these savages."

His words seemed to awaken bitterness within Jake Kindle. "Yes,' he said, "I did give your brother some advice. I reminded him of the orders he'd been given before starting on his patrol. But he was dead set on paying no attention to 'em and nearly got his command wiped out. That was what I had to say at his court-martial, and—no matter what *you* may think—every word was true."

The color drained from Mallory's cheeks, leaving them parchment white. He looked at Kindle for a moment longer, then whipped around and barked gruff orders. The troopers swung up into their saddles, and the divided command moved off in opposite directions.

In the next half-hour the small party of men in the long, narrow main building of the station watched grimly as massed ranks of red horsemen appeared on the ridgetop to the west. They saw a war-bonneted chief urge his pony forward, lift his long lance, and shake it in the direction of the log buildings. Ponies and riders swept forward in a wild charge.

Clustered about doors and windows, the defenders of the station poured a wicked fire into the oncoming throng. Bullets began to thud noisily into the log walls and whine through the windows. A heavy jug standing on the table in the center of the room flew apart as a bullet struck it.

DANE and the other men who had no rifles had been supplied from a store of weapons kept in the station for just such an emergency. Dane's borrowed rifle grew hot in his hands as he kept firing steadily, pausing only to reload.

The Sioux had galloped to within fifty yards of the log station when sudden volleys of gunfire crashed at their rear. For a moment they seemed to be thrown into complete confusion. Ponies milled aimlessly, raced to the north, then swerved back toward the south. In the distance Dane caught a fleeting glimpse of blue-clad cavalrymen pounding up from the south. Then they were blotted from sight by a converging mass of red warriors. The rattle of gunfire grew louder, then began to dwindle.

Several cavalrymen broke through the mob of encircling braves and rode desperately for the station. But each was cut down by Indian bullets before he had covered fifty yards.

And each time the distant yelling, high-pitched on a note of triumph, turned Dane's spine to ice. Horror such as he had never known gripped him, and he was oddly aware of the sound of his own breathing.

Off to the north, distant bursts of firing had been coming at intervals, but this, too, died away. Men in the low-roofed room stared at each other with shocked eyes as the meaning of what they had heard and seen slowly sank in.

Half an hour later, out of a small ravine that angled close to one end of the log stables, stumbled three gaunt figures—Mallory and two privates. They were all that remained alive of the forty men of B Troop that had ridden off a brief hour earlier.

Mallory sank wearily onto a low bench along the wall, and buried his face in his hands. He sat there for what seemed a long time without moving. Then, raising his head and peering about, he became aware of the unfriendly eyes fixed upon him.

He moistened his lips and cried suddenly, "I know what you're all thinking, but you're wrong! Sergeant Hillis lost his head and moved too soon. He forgot to wait for my signal."

His voice died, and a heavy silence filled the room. But it was of short duration. Someone yelled, "Here they come again!" and men reached hastily for their guns and took their places to repel the attack.

At sunset, when the Sioux broke off the fight and withdrew into the gathering darkness, the number of the station's able-bodied defenders had been reduced to ten. The rest were either dead or too seriously wounded to do any more fighting. Four men lay in the dust of the stable yard, shot down when

they had made a futile effort to keep the horses from being driven off.

JAKE KINDLE came over to where Dane was standing, staring out at the darkening sky. "Reckon we don't need to worry about any further attacks before morning," he said, with a half-hearted cheerfulness. "Injuns don't like to fight in the dark."

"That means we'll see daylight again anyhow. But what then?"

Kindle frowned. "Maybe with luck we can hold out for another half day. After that—" He shrugged and waved his hands helplessly.

Beside one of the rear windows someone called excitedly. "Look—over there by the creek! Isn't that a saddled horse?"

The others gathered around, peering across the meadow to where the first man was pointing.

One of the privates who had crawled to safety with Mallory said, "That's the lieutenant's big sorrel. I wonder how the Injuns ever overlooked him?"

Silently the men watched the animal, which seemed to be contentedly grazing on the creek bank several hundred yards away.

Then the private said slowly, "If I could reach that horse I could ride for help. Fort Banning is less than a three hours' ride from here."

"Not so fast, soldier," said Jake Kindle. "Just because there are no Injuns in sight is no sign that they aren't hanging around close by."

"Just the same," persisted the trooper, "give me a chance to throw my leg across that sorrel's back and I wouldn't give a damn how many hostiles were lurking around. I'd outride 'em all!"

Glancing around at the faces of the others, Dane saw approval on most of them. One miner said, "The soldier's right. If he's willing to risk his neck riding for help, I say let him. Anyhow, that's better than waiting in here to be slaughtered as soon as it gets light again!"

Murmurs of agreement arose. Jack Kindle shook his head uneasily. "I don't aim to stand in the way of the majority's wishes," he said hesitantly, "but it wouldn't surprise me if some Injun hadn't left that horse out there as bait, figuring to get himself a scalp."

The trooper stared at him, frowning. "You could be wrong, couldn't you? That horse might just accidently have happened to wander over to the creek and started grazing. Isn't that so?"

Kindle said quickly, "Anybody can be wrong, soldier. If you want to chance it, it's up to you."

The trooper thought it over a moment longer, then nodded with determination. "I'm going. As soon as it gets a little darker."

Half an hour later he slipped through the door and was gone. Inside the log building, men crouched by the windows and held their breaths, eyes straining into the darkness. It was perhaps ten minutes later that a shot rang out from the direction of the creek. It was followed by a brief, strangled cry, and after that everything was quiet again.

A man grunted despairingly, "Well, boys, there goes our last chance. Might as well make up our minds to it—in the morning we'll all die in here like a bunch of trapped rats!"

GLOOMILY the men bedded down for the night. Soon the snores of sleeping men filled the long room. At first Dane found it hard to sleep, but at last he, too, dozed off.

A faint, small sound awakened him. He lay quietly in the dark room, suddenly wide awake and listening. After a while the noise came again—the faint creaking of boots moving cautiously across the floor.

The sound came from near the door. Dane raised himself up to look, and saw a man's shape outlined for an instant against the paler dimness of the doorway. Then it vanished.

Quickly buckling on his gunbelt, Dane caught up the rifle he had propped against the wall, and stole quietly across the room. When he stepped outside, pale moonlight revealed that the man who stood motionless a few yards beyond the door was in uniform, and that he was staring with concentrated attention toward the creek, south of the station. Dane could not suppress a start as he saw that the man was Lieutenant Mallory.

Suddenly seeming to sense Dane's presence, Mallory spun around and started to raise the rifle he was holding. But he froze as he saw that the rancher's weapon was covering him.

"What's the matter, Lieutenant?" Dane asked softly. "Can't you sleep?"

The officer blurted, "Look here, Borland, you know what we're up against! There's one slim hope for all of us, and I'm going to take it."

Dane frowned. "What are you talking about?"

Lieutenant Mallory jerked his head in the direction of the creek. "That's my horse out there. If he hears my voice I may be able to coax him close enough to jump into the saddle and get away."

"Aren't you forgetting what happened to the other man who tried that?"

"I doubt if there are more than one or two Indians out there now. Anyway, it's a chance I'll have to take. Do you have any objections, Borland?"

Dane lowered his rifle. "Reckon not, Lieutenant." On a sudden impulse, he put out his hand. "Good luck, Mallory. I hope you make it."

Again the officer hesitated for a moment. Then he took Dane's hand, but there was an odd clumsiness in his manner. Then he turned away quickly, dropped to his hands and knees, and began to crawl toward the creek.

Dane squirmed forward twenty yards on his face and lay in the grass, clutching his rifle and waiting tensely. Minutes dragged by slowly. Then he saw the uniformed figure rise from the grass and make a dash toward the saddled animal on the creek bank. A dusky, naked shape jumped up a few feet in front of the sorrel and threw himself on the officer.

The two men locked in fierce struggle. Then the Indian sank to the ground, and Mallory lunged across the few remaining yards that separated him from the sorrel horse. He leaned down swiftly, slashed the hobbles, and was about to swing into the saddle when another brave emerged from the timber.

The Indian threw up his rifle and took careful aim. But before he could pull the trigger, Dane's bullet smashed into his chest. He dropped face down into the shallow water near the edge of the stream.

Lieutenant Mallory cast a startled glance at the fallen warrior, then drove his spurs against the sorrel's flanks. The rapid beat of hoofs faded quickly as he disappeared from sight.

SHORTLY after dawn, Sioux warriors swarmed up out of the shallow ravine near the stables and rushed the log house, yelling and whooping. But a withering fire from rifles and sixguns cut down their leaders, and sent them reeling back in confusion. With howls of rage they withdrew, but not before their torches had set fire to the log stable.

The structure burned fiercely, filling the air with a loud cracking as the flames licked at the walls. A dense pall of black smoke lifted into the sky and poured thickly across the yard. The choking smell of burning wood drifted through the windows.

For hours after that first attack, Sioux riflemen hidden in the tall grass kept up a constant sniping fire that made it dangerous for a man to lift his head above a window sill. But the spirits of the defenders were surprisingly high. Gone was the mood of black despair that had gripped them the evening before.

Responsible for the change was the news that Lieutenant Mallory had slipped through the Indian lines and was riding for help. Last night they had greeted the information with an outburst of wild jubilation, slapping each other joyously on the back and speculating loudly on the length of time it would take for a relief column from Fort Banning to reach them.

As the morning hours waned and the sun lifted steadily toward its zenith, the ring of Indian marksmen crept closer. Bullets whined furiously through the window openings. And off in the distance, well out of rifle range, red horsemen massed on four sides of the besieged station, awaiting the signal to drive forward in a final overwhelming charge that would annihilate the small party of white men left alive within its walls.

An hour before noon a bearded, grimy-faced hostler turned from the window where he had been gazing anxiously toward the north. "Where are the soldiers we've been expecting?" he blurted bitterly. "Mallory must have reached the fort last night. What's holding 'em up?"

Nobody said anything, but it was evident that this question lay heavily upon the mind of every man present. Dane tried to shake off an ugly thought that had been growing stronger within him minute by minute.

Finally, unable to endure it any longer, he drew Jake Kindle aside and spoke to him in a carefully-lowered voice. "Jake, you don't suppose that Mallory—" He halted awkwardly, reluctant to put his suspicions into words.

"You're beginning to wonder about that, too, eh—if the lieutenant ever had any honest intention of fetching help when he rode away from here or if he was mainly concerned with saving his own hide?"

Dane eyed Kindle with startled eyes. "Then you have that idea too, huh—that he might not *want* to see us rescued?"

"Yep. I reckon that idea's been kicking around in the back of my brain for some hours now. I figure I know the lieutenant pretty well, and the one thing he's got an overdose of is pride in himself and his family name. That's why his brother's court-martial and dismissal from the service hit him so hard. Now his own army career is at stake, and he faces the same kind of disgrace if the truth about yesterday's massacre ever gets out."

Kindle paused, tightening his lips grimly. "That's why I figure if none of us gets out of here alive it won't be too distressing to the lieutenant. He can maybe make up some fancy lie that will clear him of responsibility for what happened to B Troop. He might even turn out to be a hero, if he can make it out smart enough."

DANE returned to the window. It was hard to believe that Kindle's estimate of the officer was correct. But suppose the scout was right? The thought of Elaine Connors marrying a man capable of such treachery was enough to create nausea.

At mid-day the Sioux attack began. To Dane it had the quality of a nightmare that went on and on unendingly—a nightmare of galloping ponies with naked brown bodies crouched low on their necks, glimpsed through clouds of spiraling dust. There was a fiendish, inhuman yelling, rising above the swelling thunder of hoofs and the constant crackle of exploding rifles.

Dane squeezed off shots until his rifle barrel grew hot. Then he flung it aside and snatched up a loaded carbine. He emptied its magazine into the oncoming horde of riders.

Then, incredibly, the nightmare was over.

Dane stared, stunned, unbelieving, as charging Sioux horsemen abruptly whirled their ponies and dashed away. The snipers, too, were crawling away through the grass in hasty retreat. In a matter of minutes, every Indian in sight had gone over the crest of the high ground to the west, leaving a strange silence.

It was a silence broken presently by the brassy blare of a distant bugle. And then, moving out of the billowing dust cloud that had appeared to the north, came the vanguard of an advancing cavalry column.

Crow scouts led the way, followed by the advance guard, with flankers flung wide on either side. After them came a small group of officers, then the main body of uniformed troopers. Lumbering supply wagons brought up the rear, crawling slowly into sight over the hill north of the station.

When a group of officers, with Major Hawes at their head, rode up, Dane Borland was in the huddle of men standing in the station yard. The major's sharp gaze took in the charred remains of the stable, rested briefly on other grim evidences of battle. His brows shot up as he caught sight of the one man in uniform among the survivors.

"Isn't that Private Kennedy of B Troop?"

The uniformed man stepped forward and saluted. "It is, sir."

Hawes frowned. "How did you get here, Kennedy? Where are Mallory and the rest of B Troop?"

Kennedy's jaw sagged. "You haven't heard, the Lieutenant, sir? He was riding to the fort to get aid."

Major Hawes and the other officers exchanged startled glances. Jake Kindle stepped forward. "Hold on, Major," he called. "If Mallory didn't get word to you, how come you're here?"

"Our scouts reported sighting smoke in this direction. They thought it might be from burning buildings, so I decided to move this way. We've been trying to pick up Red Cloud's trail ever since we left the post yesterday morning."

Dane was hardly aware of what Kennedy was saying as the trooper stammered out his story of what had happened to Troop B. The look in Major Hawes's eyes grew sterner by the moment.

JUST an hour before dusk, riding in one of the mule-drawn supply wagons, with an escort of half a dozen troopers, Dane and the other survivors of the siege at the stage station rolled through the gates of Fort Banning.

Half an hour later, Dane and Jake Kindle were present at headquarters when Private Kennedy repeated his story to the acting Post Commander, Captain Connors. The erect, silvery-haired officer listened attentively, but it was only after Kindle and Dane Borland had backed Kennedy's recital that the stunned look in the captain's blue eyes was replaced by icy rage.

"I want Lieutenant Mallory brought here at once!" he told the orderly. "And see that my daughter is summoned immediately."

"Then Mallory *is* here at the post!" exclaimed Dane.

"It's incredible!" Connors said softly. "Mallory showed up just a short while ago. He claimed that he had been separated from his command in a sudden surprise attack by hostiles. He said they'd pulled him off his horse and taken him captive, that he didn't know what had happened to the rest of the men in the patrol. But he had succeeded in getting away by bashing a couple of his captors on the head as they were taking him back to their camp. And you know, he made it sound *plausible!*"

For a while no one said anything. Then quick footsteps were heard in the outer room and Elaine Connors burst through the door. She halted at sight of Dane, and her eyes slowly widened. She hardly seemed aware of the others in the room.

"Why, Dane, what is the meaning of this?" she said.

Her father spoke up gruffly. "Elaine, I sent for you because I wanted you to hear this with your own ears. I'm afraid this is going to come as a shock to you."

An orderly put his head in the door to announce that Lieutenant Mallory had arrived.

The next moment Mallory, neat and dapper in a fresh uniform, walked into the room. He saw Elaine and started to smile, then his glance touched the three men standing beside Conners's desk. The effect was startling. His body stiffened, and the smile slid from his lips as he stared. Shocked dismay flitted across his face.

All the stiff arrogance seemed to go out of him, and his shoulders slumped.

Captain Connors said harshly, "Lieutenant Mallory, did you deliberately plan—"

Mallory acted without warning. A hard gleam of desperation in his eyes, he took one quick stride across the room, snatching the army Colt from his belt. Gripping Elaine by the arm, he dragged her in front of him and raised the weapon to within an inch of her head.

"Connors, listen to me," he said fiercely. "If you value your daughter's life, you'll do exactly as I say! I want two horses brought up from the stables, and if anyone makes any attempt to interfere with our leaving, I swear I'll kill your daughter!"

Every man in the room stood rooted to the floor, their faces stunned and bewildered. Dane felt sick. His heart was beating so loudly it seemed to him that everyone there must be aware of it.

A muscle in Mallory's cheek began to work. Impatience stirred in his eyes. "I'm warning you, Connors! Do as I say, or I'll pull the trigger."

"Don't listen to him, Dad!" Elaine said suddenly. "He wouldn't dare."

"Shut up, you!" Mallory clapped his hand roughly over her mouth. He shuttled his glance back to her father. "I'll give you exactly ten seconds longer to make up your mind."

CAPTAIN CONNORS, gray-faced, stepped to the door. He opened it a few inches to direct that the horses be brought.

The tenseness in Mallory's body eased. He looked around, a half smile on his lips. "I knew I could depend on your sense of chivalry, gentlemen. Of course, I don't like to resort to methods like this. No gentleman ever likes to treat a lady with anything but the greatest respect."

Dane cut in suddenly, "What makes you think you're a gentleman, Mallory, or that you ever were?"

Mallory turned startled, angry eyes upon the rancher. "I'll have you know that my family is one of the most respected in Boston. But I can hardly expect you to understand."

"You think the name Mallory will still be respected when news gets back there of what you've done, how you allowed your men to be butchered out of sheer spite? You were willing to see other men die just to keep your secret safe. And now you're willing to bargain with the life of the girl you're supposed to love!"

Ruddy color was flooding into the lieutenant's face. "Keep talking like that, mister, and I'll put a bullet through your heart," he snarled savagely.

But Dane ignored the threat. There was a calm purpose in his eyes now. "And even if nobody back in Boston ever hears the truth, you'll know in your own heart what a filthy stench in the nostrils the name of Mallory has become. You'll know that out here men will spit at the mention of it. Your brother was disgraced and kicked out of the army. But, alongside of you, he's a hero!"

A bluish vein swelled in Mallory's forehead. Wild rage danced in his eyes. "Damn you," he shouted, "I warned you to keep quiet!"

He swung the gun away from the girl and leveled it at Dane. The rancher saw his finger move to tighten about the trigger, and in that instant he crouched low and lunged forward.

The crash of the exploding pistol was earsplittingly loud in the small room. Dane felt the bullet burn against his ribs, caught a whiff of acrid gunpowder. Then he was clutching the lieutenant's arm.

Kindle leaped across the room, with Private Kennedy only a half step behind. One moment more and Mallory was flat on his back.

DANE BORLAND took his bride northward to the ranch on the Belle Fourche as soon as word came that the Indian trouble was definitely over. On that first evening, they sat together outside the door of the sturdy log ranch house, watching the sunset glow fade slowly from the sky.

"Not too disappointed with your new home, are you, honey?" he asked.

"Disappointed?" She stirred indignantly. "Why should I be? Everything is wonderful—much nicer than I ever dreamed it would be." She sighed blissfully. "Dane, you can't possibly understand how wonderful it is to sit here on the doorstep of our home and know it will be our home tomorrow and the day after that—to know that these aren't just temporary quarters that we may have to leave at twelve hours' notice."

Dane said, "If you don't like the furniture, I figured maybe we could have some sent on from the East. And I was thinking, too, that some new rooms could be built onto the house."

Elaine Borland shook her head firmly. "I adore the home-made furniture—every single piece of it. I wouldn't trade it for all the factory-made furniture they have back East. As for the house, it's a nice house, and large enough for the present. There's no reason to add to it unless—"

Even in the dusk, Dane was aware of her blush. He chuckled delightedly. "I didn't know army brats knew how to blush. Anyhow, it's mighty becoming."

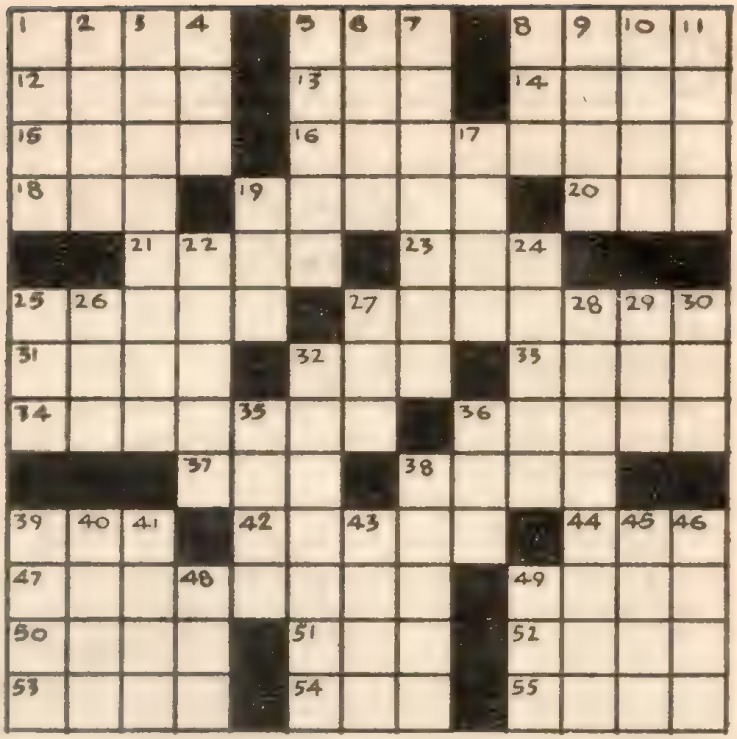
She was still blushing, and laughing a little, too. "Dane, you're embarrassing me. Do you have to sit there staring at me like that?"

"No, honey, I could be doing this." He slid his arm about her, and kissed her.

Elaine rested her head on his shoulder. "That's much better, dear," she said contentedly.

Dane thought so, too.

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



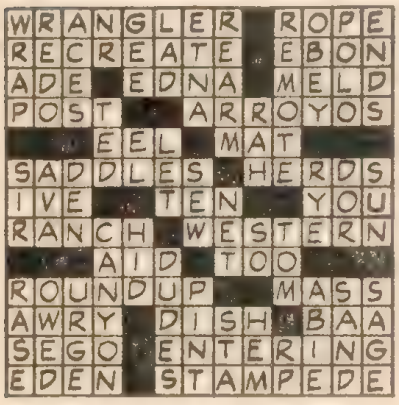
The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1 Dull pain
5 Reputation (slang)
8 Group of cattle
12 To use one's teeth
13 Rowing implement
14 Open surface
15 Female horse
16 Cowboy
18 Before
19 To misrepresent
20 Large deer
21 To touch
23 Royal Asiatic Society (abbr.)
25 Overhead
27 Tied
31 Girl's name
32 To hasten
33 Lion's sound
34 Cowboys' seats
36 To move with haste
37 Ever (contr.)
38 Chatters (colloq.)
39 Past
42 Places of bliss
44 Miss Gabor
47 Mexican broad-brimmed hat
49 Prayer ending
50 Leg joint
51 Border
52 Charge per unit
53 Dispatched
54 To look at
55 To recognize

DOWN

1 Highest point
2 To burn partially
3 White-faced cattle
4 Female sheep
5 Cowboy's spur wheel
6 British nobleman
7 Western treeless area
8 Ugly old woman
9 —— Stanley Gardner, author
10 To stagger
11 Not light
17 Tidy
19 Honey maker
22 To dodge
24 To wash with rubbing
25 Donkey
26 To bleat
27 That man's
28 Cowboy
29 Organ of hearing
30 Not wet
32 Men who tend sheep
35 Sinister look
36 Possesses
39 Fairy tale dwarf
39 Inquires
40 Vanished
41 Sign of the future
43 Lake bordering Ohio
45 President's "no"
46 Afresh
48 Wager
49 Noah's boat



Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

Reed held the gun in one hand, the boy by the other

KILLER IN TOWN

By ***BEN FRANK***

FOR WEEKS the Elk Basin country had been scorching hot. The heat made a man break out with a rash. It set his nerves on edge. It made him want to kick things around.

"Damn!" Sheriff Ed Macy exploded. And for the third time in nine minutes, he shoved back from his desk and went to a window.

He was twenty-nine, tall and lean, with a lot of steel-wire muscle under his sweaty shirt. He felt old and tired.

Maybe he felt that way because of the hellish heat, he thought. But more than likely this feeling had had its beginning the day Elk River had stopped flowing. Any way you looked at it, the trouble between the Bar T and the Half-moon was a spawn of the dying river.

And as the dryness increased, you felt

SHERIFF ED MACY stood alone against a rising tide of violence . . . and if he won, he would lose the girl he loved

that trouble growing, like some ugly monster. You felt it in the blasting sunshine and the withered grass under your feet. You saw it in the inch-wide cracks in the ground, and in the way people stared straight ahead at nothing. And watching it, you grew old fast.

"A good rain would settle the whole business," Ed thought. Then qualified this with, "If it rains soon enough."

Again his eyes strayed to the five Bar T ponies. They stood like statues in an edge of shade at the side of Sam Weston's feed store. It was even too hot for the flies to bite. Rice Reed and the three Bar T hands had gone into the Cattleman's Saloon. Old Hank Taylor, owner of the Bar T, had stepped into the feed store. It was Rice Reed who worried Ed. Wild, reckless, trigger quick, the old man's grandson had cut some notches in his gun during the year he'd been away from Spur Ridge. His return spelled trouble. Then, shifting his gaze, Ed saw the girl.

She was as slim as a rifle. But there the resemblance ended, for old Hank Taylor's granddaughter was a very attractive girl. She was not beautiful, when you stopped to think about it, but no one stopped to think about it when he saw her smile and the way she carried her head—like a fine race horse, Ed sometimes thought.

In the full-skirted print dress, her arms, legs and shoulders bare and as brown as fine golden dust, she was the only lovely thing in sight. She was one of the world's marvels. And then Ed saw his seven-year-old son, Dave, come running to catch up with her, and felt a lump squeeze into his throat.

His motherless kid needed a woman like Myra Tylor in his life. Ed himself needed her, too. He'd known that for a long time.

He went over to the door and stepped out into the pounding heat of midafternoon. Myra and the boy moved into the shade of the building, and she said, "Hello, Ed."

The kid, Dave, grinned, and in his grin Ed saw a tiny flash of his dead mother's smile. But it was better not to remember. It was better to look to the future.

"Still no rain," he said to Myra.

She was troubled now, and a frown tightened the fine brown skin about her blue eyes. "It's terrible, Ed. Have you seen the river lately?"

He shook his head.

"Nothing but puddles."

"Your granddad getting ready to ship out a herd?"

He saw her jaw stiffen. "Everybody's shipping," she said. "The market's no good."

"Elk River won't water all the Bar T and Half-moon stock much longer," he said. "Then what?"

"Then let the Half-moon ship."

SHE was angry about it, he saw. She turned and started to walk away. But she didn't want to leave him and the boy like this. She smiled and ran her clean, strong fingers through Dave's hair.

"Mrs. Parker's making a new dress for me," she said. "I came to see how she's getting along."

Ed grinned. "Imagine coming seven miles through this heat to see about a dress."

She laughed. It was a good sound to hear. It gave you a lift.

" 'By, Dave," she said. "I'll be seeing you, Ed."

Smiling, he watched her hurry on along the street, her honey-blond hair golden in the sunlight. Then he thought of Rice Reed and lost his smile. "How," he asked himself, "can cousins be so damned different?"

"Something wrong, Pop?" Dave asked anxiously.

The kid caught on fast. Ed grinned and shook his head.

Dave returned to some game he'd been playing, and Ed moved back into the doorway. He thought of Doris, the kid's mother—how he'd taken the kid and moved southward, thinking he could never settle down again. But in Spur Ridge he'd found Myra, and he hadn't gone on. Somehow it had gotten around that he'd served as a deputy back home, so they'd elected him sheriff here in the basin.

A clatter of horses pulled him around, and he saw three Half-moon riders swing in from the west. He checked his gun and went outside. Sometimes, he knew, the sight of a lawman could prevent an explosion.

The Half-moon outfit swung over to the Elk Horn Saloon. The two hands, Shorty Davis and a lanky red-head, went into the saloon. Lou Nichols, owner of the Half-moon, turned back along the street toward the post office, just as old Hank Taylor wandered out of Sam Weston's feed store. Tensing, Ed moved on out into the dusty street.

The two ranchers met, an old man and a young man who had once been friends, and passed without speaking. Ed knew then how bad it was. These two had finished with words. Their next talk would likely be with guns.

The old man waited for Ed in the shade of the barber shop. He was short, stubby, and eagle-eyed. He had lived through some good years and a lot of bad ones. The bad ones had toughened him.

"Too many cattle watering in Elk River, Hank?" Ed asked.

"Yeah," Taylor answered shortly.

"You could be in the wrong," Ed said mildly.

"You sticking up for Lou Nichols, Ed?"

"No. I'm sticking up for fair play. The river divides the Bar T and the Half-moon. For years you and Lou have had a gentlemen's agreement to share the water fifty-fifty."

"It's never been this dry before," Taylor said bitterly.

"All the more reason to stop crowding the valley with cattle. Both ranches should ship surplus stock and share the loss."

The old man's eyes blazed. "Let Lou ship. He can stand a loss better'n me."

"That's not the point, Hank."

"It is with me," Hank Taylor said flatly. "If I can hold on till fall, I'll come out on top. If I can't, I may go broke like I have a time or two before. I'm too damned old to start over again. Lou's got a lot of years ahead of him—unless he takes a notion to start trouble."

Ed let his eyes wander toward the mountains and a thin line of clouds. If those clouds would only push on into the basin—

"Why don't you, Lou, and me get together and talk?"

Taylor laughed shortly. "Lou and me have talked. If you're smart, Ed, you'll keep your nose out of it."

AT THAT moment, Rice Reed shoved through the batwing of the Cattleman's Saloon and sauntered toward them, dark, smoky-eyed, a pleasant smile on his thin face. He was in his middle twenties. He made Ed think of a tiger.

"Hello, Sheriff." He kept his long, quick fingers busy rolling a smoke. His clothes were ordinary, except for his boots. They had cost plenty. "Think it'll ever rain?"

Ed still felt a flush of anger from the old man's unreasonableness. "You might as well know the score, Reed," he said tightly. "I know things are ripe for trouble. If there's a killing, you'll be the first man I'll suspect."

Reed smiled again, but his smoky eyes had frosted over. He held a match to his cigarette.

"You got me all wrong, Sheriff." He flipped the burning match insolently past Ed's left shoulder. "I'm just a plain, hard-working cowboy."

He and the old man went on along the street. Ed returned to his office with the depressed feeling that he'd lost the opening round in his fight to keep peace in the basin.

Later, he saw Lou Nichols and his men hit leather and ride from town. About four that afternoon the Bar T men pulled out. Ed's eyes swept the brassy sky. The clouds were higher over the mountains. Maybe, he thought, it would rain before the fuse reached the powder keg.

The shadows were long when Myra came riding along the hot street. Ed was waiting for her. She was one thing, he thought, that the heat couldn't wither. And when she said, "Going to ride with me, Ed?" he was afraid she'd hear his heart pounding.

They didn't talk about the drought until

they came to the river. The dying trees and the stinking water holes gave Ed a sudden hopeless feeling.

"Worse than I realized," he muttered.

They crossed the dry bed and began to follow the river on the Bar T side.

"I'm scared, Ed," Myra said abruptly. "Lou Nichols was unreasonably angry when grandfather refused to thin out the Bar T herd."

"Unreasonably?"

She shot him a quick, startled glance. Again he saw her face tighten. He knew how it was with Myra. Her loyalty and love for the old man and the sprawling ranch made her blind to certain facts.

"Are you for Lou Nichols?" she asked.

"I'm for fairness," he answered.

"Fairness?" Her voice sounded tired. "Is it fair for an old man to lose everything after years and years—"

Her voice broke. She rode away from him, her horse kicking up angry puffs of powdery dust.

Ed didn't want to argue or quarrel with her, so he let her go. Shoulders slumped, he turned back along the river.

Once he halted at a pool of skummy water to stare at the cattle crowded into it. There were Bar T and Half-moon brands on the thin, dusty rumps, and twice as many togues to lap up the water as there should be. Thinking about it made him a little sick.

He rode on through the gathering darkness. Some lightning sprayed the clouds over the mountains, but it was so damned far away he couldn't hear the thunder.

DAVE was waiting for him in the old house behind the jail. The woman who kept house for them had left some supper for Ed. He sat down and began to eat.

"Pop," Dave asked, "are you going to marry Myra?"

"Now, what made you ask that?" Ed countered.

"If you're not," Dave answered. "I'm going to."

Ed grinned. "Not a bad idea, son."

He went out into the night. The lightning had stopped. He thought of Myra and how the trouble was edging between them. Myra, he knew, was the anchor that held him here and made a man of him. If he lost her he wouldn't be much good for anything.

It didn't rain that night, or the next. On the third morning, Hank Taylor and Rice Reed rode into town. When they turned toward the jail hitchrack, Ed went out to meet them. He knew by the red anger on the old man's face that trouble had broken.

"Ed," Taylor said harshly, "Lou Nichols has started to thin out the cattle along Elk River. We found nine head of Bar T stock—dead!"

"How?" Ed asked hollowly.

"Lead poisoning." Hank held out a slug. "This is one of the bullets."

"Nine won't save much water."

"It's a beginning. There'll be more."

"Somebody see Lou shoot 'em?"

"Hell, no! But who else would do it?"

Ed tossed the slug into the air and caught it. "You got a .45 in your holster," he said. "Reed's packing one. So am I. So are a lot of others."

"Trying to tell me I killed my own cattle?"

"Trying to tell you a .45 slug's no evidence against Lou."

The old man cursed heavily. "Come on, Rice, let's—"

"Wait." Ed put a hand on Taylor's arm. It felt thin and unsteady. It made him realize for the first time how old and frail the rancher had become. And for the first time, he thought what it must be like to know you didn't have enough time left to make a fresh start.

"Take it easy, Hank," he said more kindly. "Don't do anything about this until I've had a chance to talk with Lou."

Taylor didn't make any promises. He climbed into the saddle and swayed dizzily. The heat and the worry were hard on an old man. He swung his sweaty mount around and headed back along the empty street.

Reed said, "Don't look at me like that, Sheriff. Half the Bar T will come to me

when the old man dies. I wouldn't shoot my own cattle, would I?"

Grinning, he stepped into the saddle and followed the old man out of town.

IT WAS a long, hot ride to the Half-moon. But at last Ed circled a pole corral and rode into the scant shade of a half-leafless cottonwood.

Lou came out of the house, a big-shouldered, blocky-faced man no older than Ed. His young wife stood in the doorway, shading her eyes against the glare. She looked tired.

"Giddyap! Indian attack! Mush!"

"Cooler inside," Lou said. "Got some pie and coffee."

"We'd better talk first," Ed said.

They went out to the horse barn. Shorty Davis and Cliff Dally, Lou's foreman, were doing something to an old saddle. They shoved to their feet, and Cliff said in a friendly voice, "Hello, Ed."

Ed told them bluntly about the dead Bar T cattle. "I've never known you or Cliff to lie about anything, Lou," he finished. "Did the Half-moon have anything to do with killing those cows?"

"Hell, no," Lou said flatly. "But it gives me an idea."

"Better forget it," Ed said, grinning faintly.

"I tried to work out a deal with old Hank to lighten the load on the river by each of us shipping part of our herds," Lou said. "He told me where I could go."

Ed glanced at Cliff Dally. "You want to add anything to the conversation?"

Cliff grinned. "You might tell that old hellion it'll take more than his gunslinging grandson to make it rain."

"Your word's good enough for me," Ed said. "I'll see if I can't iron things out someway."

"Better came to the house and sample that pie," Lou repeated his invitation.

Ed shook his head. He wanted to make Elk River before dark. He went outside and stared at the mountains. Again clouds were forming above them. He climbed wearily into the saddle. It was so hot it burned through the seat of his pants.

"As long as I'm sheriff, there'll be no range war, Lou," he said.

Lou made no answer, but the expression on his face said that he was about through being pushed around.

At the Bar T, Myra answered Ed's knock. The light was behind her, making a golden halo of her hair, and he had to guess at the expression in her eyes. But somehow he believed she was glad to see him. Then old Hank Taylor came stamping into the room, his mouth a straight, grim line.

"What's new, Sheriff?" he asked curtly.

Myra moved back, and the light struck her face. Then Ed wasn't so sure that she'd been glad to see him.

"I've talked with Lou and Cliff," he said. "They deny shooting your cattle."

"What did you expect 'em to do? Admit it?"

"Never knew Lou or Cliff to lie about anything," Ed said.

The old man laughed sourly. He unhooked a Winchester from wall pegs and squinted along the bright barrel.

"They've killed their last Bar T animal," he said. "We're going to patrol our side of the river. A Half-moon man won't cross over but once!"

"Then somebody'll get jailed for murder," Ed said in a tight voice. "Like I told Lou, there's not going to be a range war here."

"Get the hell out of here, Macy," Taylor broke in furiously. "Get out and stay out!"

TO REASON with the old man would be a waste of time, Ed knew. He went out into the night, and Taylor flung the door shut. But Myra opened it almost instantly, stepped outside, and walked with Ed out to where he'd left his horse.

"He doesn't mean it, Ed," she said, touching his arm. "It's the heat—it's bad for an old man. And the worry." She lifted her face to the sky and, in the light of a new moon, he thought he saw a tear glisten on her cheek. "If it would only rain!"

He touched her cheek with a gentle finger. It was a tear. The next thing he knew he was holding her close.

It had been a long time. He'd almost forgotten what it was like to hold a woman.

"It'll rain," he said huskily, "and things will be all right again. Then, Myra, maybe you and I—Myra, I guess you know how I feel. That I want you to—"

She shoved away from him. He'd forgotten how strong a woman can be when she makes up her mind to reject a man.

"How can you talk like that when you're working against us?" she said bitterly. Then she put her hands to her face and began to cry. "I'm sorry, Ed," she said brokenly. "It's this dry weather and this damned heat!"

He'd never heard her swear before, and it surprised him. Yet he couldn't help admiring her all the more for saying it the way she felt it. He reached for her again, but she'd made up her mind and stepped back.

"It's all over, Ed," she went on. "It's better that we ended it here and now, when we don't see things alike."

She turned and fled back into the house.

The next morning Rice Reed rode into Spur Ridge alone. Ed stood in his office doorway, watching him go into the post office. Presently the man came out and followed the street to the Cattleman's Saloon.

Ed returned to his desk. He'd hardly got settled down to some paper work when Lou Nichols stalked in.

Lou's block face was gray under the dust and sweat. He said, "I've got something to show you, Ed," and strode back into the blazing sunshine.

With a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach, Ed followed him into Jim Cramer's undertaking establishment. Shorty Davis lay stretched out on a table. He had been shot in the back.

"Sent him to Indian Head Bend to see how the water was holding out there," Lou said hoarsely. "That's where we found him. On our side of the river!"

"No tracks or anything?"

Lou laughed bitterly. "On that rocky ground?"

Ed went outside and stared for a moment at the Bar T pony. He'd told Reed that if anyone were killed, he'd be the man he would suspect first. And he'd meant it. A great anger building up in him, he followed the boardwalk to the saloon, and went in.

REED stood alone at the bar, talking to Class Mains, the barkeep. Seeing Ed, Class set down a bottle at Reed's elbow and moved away.

"Have a drink, Sheriff," Reed said pleasantly.

Ed ignored the invitation. "Shorty Davis was murdered some time last night," he said.

Reed's eyes frosted over. "Saw 'em bringing him in. You going to arrest me for the murder, Sheriff?"

"You have an alibi for last night?"

Reed carefully set down his glass. "The old man had me and the boys watching our side of the river last night."

"And part of the night you were alone."

"You guessed it, Sheriff." Reed smiled, but his eyes said he didn't mean it. "It would be a mistake to charge me with murder unless you can make it stick."

Ed smiled back. His eyes said he didn't mean it, either.

"I can't make it stick," he said. "But watch it, Reed. I don't like your kind. Nothing would please me more than an excuse to look you up or run you out of the country."

"Thanks," Reed said dryly. "I'll keep that in mind."

Back in his oven-hot office, Ed tried to think. Maybe Reed wanted to start a range war. Maybe he wasn't as sure of inheriting half the Bar T as he'd let on, and figured that fighting for the old man would strengthen his claim. On the other hand, maybe he hadn't done any of the shooting.

Presently he went to the window with some idea of shutting it to keep out the hot wind, and saw Lou Nichols come out of the undertaker's. Then he saw Reed, and realized that the two were going to meet near the mouth of Sam Weston's alley.

Funny, how a man will sometimes wait too long to make up his mind about something. Suddenly Ed knew he'd fooled around too long.

He lunged for the door. He heard the shot before he reached the door. Then he saw Reed with a smoking gun in his hand and Lou sitting in the dust, squeezing his bloody right arm with his left hand. Ed's first reaction was one of relief that Lou hadn't been killed. Then he saw Reed step toward the fallen man. Ed moved fast then.

He hadn't quite reached the alley when Reed kicked Lou viciously with a pointed toe of a shiny boot. Lou groaned and sprawled back in the dust. Ed saw red.

He hit Reed, sending him staggering back against the side of a building. Reed lost his gun. He shook his head and spat blood.

"A star doesn't give any man a right to hit me like that!" he snarled.

He came back, fists hammering home. Ed circled to avoid stepping on Lou, and Reed pinned him against a building.

A new boot flashed in the sun, and Ed bit back a scream. Blinded with pain and rage, he lashed out and snapped the man's head back viciously. After that, he hammered him with cold fury until he went down. Then Ed picked him up out of the dust and flung him out into the street. Reed didn't move. He lay sprawled in the sun, his face a bloody mess.

"What happened, Lou?" Ed panted.

Lou shook his head in a dazed way. His arm was beginning to hurt like hell.

"I said somethin' about Shorty. He made a pass at his gun, and I went after mine. The next thing—"

Lou closed his eyes and passed out.

MEN came hurrying up to carry Lou to Doc Craig's office. Ed stumbled into the street. He got Reed on his feet, took him over to the jail and locked him up.

Old Hank Taylor and Myra came to town that same night. The old man had arranged for Reed's bond. An angry glint in his eyes, he flung the papers on Ed's desk.

"When a man can't defend himself without getting locked up in jail, it's time we elected a new sheriff!" he stormed. "Too bad Rice didn't kill Lou instead of winging him!"

"Maybe he was smart enough to know that it wouldn't be so easy for you to get him out of here if he killed Lou," Ed said dryly.

He let Reed out and handed him his unloaded gun. The man's face was raw and swollen.

"I owe you something, Macy," he said in a flat, brittle voice. "Maybe I can pay it back some time, with interest!"

He stamped out into the night, every step ringing with hate. The old man followed, but Myra stopped in the doorway. Ed never had seen her look so pale.

"You had no right to beat him up like that," she said. "Even if you are the sheriff."

A rumble of thunder drew Ed to a window. He had lost Myra. Whether or not it rained now didn't seem to matter. Nothing seemed to matter but his sense of aloneness.

There was no rain; and for the next few days, Spur Ridge lay under the burning sun, almost lifeless. On the fifth day, Ed saddled a pony and headed toward Elk River. It was almost noon when he met some of the Half-moon outfit. Lou was leading the way, his arm in a sling, a look on his face that said he should be home taking it easy.

Ed's eyes shifted. Cliff Dally was there, hunkered low in his saddle, and Red Martin, sitting up ramrod straight. A third man—suddenly Ed had the uncanny feeling that Shorty Davis had come back to life.

"Charles Davis, Shorty's brother from near Denver," Lou introduced. "He kind of wanted to know firsthand just what happened to Shorty."

Charley Davis lifted his shoulders, and Ed saw then that he was taller than Shorty had been, and maybe thirty pounds heavier. But still the resemblance was strong.

"Lou's told me about a gent by the name of Reed," Charlie said quietly. "From the way they've described him, I've got a notion I've seen him before."

"Where?" Ed asked.

"Colorado." Charley's eyes hardened. "I saw a gent get tangled up with a bank teller during a holdup. Afterward he sort of vanished. No one ever knew who he was. But this Reed sounds like he looked, and if he's the same man he's wanted for murder."

"You think Reed mistook Shorty for you and decided to eliminate a witness?" Ed asked.

"Could be." Charley smiled thinly. "I figure I'd like to know for sure, Sheriff. Lou promised to give me a glimpse of this man Reed."

"I want to know for sure, too," Ed said grimly. "Let's go, men."

THE sun-scorched Bar T ranch house had a deserted appearance when they arrived. Dismounting, they headed for the front porch. Old Hank Taylor saw them coming and stepped outside, a rifle cradled in his arm.

"I damned near shot first instead of waiting to ask questions," he said in a gritty voice. "What do you gents want?"

Ed took over. He introduced Charley Davis and laid the cards face up before the old man. Before he'd finished talking, Taylor began to curse them in a cold, hard voice.

"You're wasting your breath, Hank," Ed broke in.

"All right," Taylor said. "We'll go find Rice. He and Myra went to Spur Ridge to pick up some grub. But if you try to frame Rice for something he didn't do—"

"No one's going to be framed," Ed said.

A rumble of thunder rolled in the distance. They turned to look at the clouds rising over the mountains. They were black and ugly.

"It could rain," Charley Davis muttered.

No one believed him.

The first scattered drops pocked the thick dusk as they rode into the west end of the street. Ed took off his old hat and felt a drop of water against his face. But he didn't look. He'd spotted the Bar T buckboard tied in front of the general store, and a tenseness was fiddling through him.

The flurry of raindrops had stopped by the time they'd kicked free of the stirrups and stepped up on the boardwalk. Dave came running up, his blue eyes like saucers.

"Did you see it rain, Pop?" he shouted excitedly.

Before Ed could send him away, Myra came out of the store. Seeing the men, her eyes widened with fear. She stepped over to her grandfather and clutched his arm.

"What's wrong?" she asked huskily.

The old man told her, and Ed saw her fear give way to anger. She believed this was simply another raw deal for Reed and the Bar T, and Ed couldn't blame her for feeling that way.

"Let's get this thing settled and then have some apologies," the old man snapped. "Where's Rice, Myra?"

"Said he was going over to the Cattleman's Saloon.

A great blazing crash of lightning stopped her. A whisper of wind sprang up and played through the dust like a thousand tiny fingers. Suddenly, the rain came, twisting out of the black clouds. Frightened, Dave ran to Myra, and she instinctively put an arm about him and held him close. But Ed didn't notice, for he was booting it toward the Cattleman's Saloon.

His hat got away from him in a sudden devilish twist of wind, but he let it go. He heard feet pounding behind him. The rain tore at his hair and washed along his

face. Groping for the batwings, he shoved into the saloon.

HIS EYES swept the gloomy room. Rice Reed was not there. Then he spotted an overturned chair near a window, and whirled on Class Mains.

"Where'd Reed go?" he demanded.

"Out the back way. When it started to rain he jumped up and ran like he was scared of a storm."

"It's not a storm," Ed said bleakly. "He saw a ghost."

He ran to the back door and looked into the alley. Nothing but the swirling rain. He turned and saw old Hank Taylor, who had followed him into the room.

The old rancher looked tired and beaten. "Give me a drink, Class," he mumbled.

Outside, someone shouted Ed's name. Whirling, he shouldered through the door. Myra was plunging toward him, her wet hair plastered against her cheeks and head. And then he saw the blood on her bruised lips and felt the beginning of a terrible anger.

"Rice came running out of the alley," she gasped. "I told him you were looking for him. He laughed—said he knew it. Then he took Dave and a horse. I tried to stop him but —"

Ed knew then why her mouth was bleeding. Reed had struck her. Then he was suddenly sick with fear.

"Dave?" he whispered hoarsely. "He took Dave?"

"He said if no one followed him, he wouldn't hurt Dave." Myra wiped a hand across her mouth and stared at the red stains. "You can't believe him, Ed! He's scared. Crazy scared!"

But there was more to it than being scared, Ed knew, remembering Reed's hate. He ran on rubbery legs toward his horse. The mud sucked at his feet; the rain blinded him. His hands shook so that he had trouble untying his horse, but he was beginning to think again.

"One man might slip up on him," he shouted above the howling storm. "A posse could never do that. So I'll go alone."

Myra was untying her grandfather's horse. "Not alone," she said.

"You can't go!" he said angrily.

"Nothing can stop me," she said.

There were no tracks to follow. But they needed none, for Reed's only route to safety lay over the mountains and through Wildhorse Pass. Ed and the girl rode against the storm, without talking much.

Once, he said, "It's getting dark."

Later, she asked, "Will this rain settle the trouble in the basin, Ed?"

"It'll help," he replied. But he knew that it had come too late to help Shorty Davis, or to save his boy from terror and, perhaps, death.

"Lou didn't kill the cattle, Myra."

"I know," she said. "I've got it figured out. Rice did it. He wanted to start a range war. An old man and his granddaughter might die in a range war. Then there would be no question about the ownership of the Bar T."

They'd both been over the trail before

[*Turn page*]

Work, Sleep, Play In Comfort ...Without Nagging Backache!

Nagging backache, loss of pep and energy, headaches and dizziness may be due to slow-down of kidney function. Doctors say good kidney function is very important to good health. When some everyday condition, such as stress and strain, causes this important function to slow down, many folks suffer nagging backache — feel miserable. Minor bladder irritations due to cold or wrong diet may cause getting up nights or frequent passages.

Don't neglect your kidneys if these conditions bother you. Try Doan's Pills — a mild diuretic. Used successfully by millions for over 50 years. It's amazing how many times Doan's give happy relief from these discomforts—help the 15 miles of kidney tubes and filters flush out waste. Get Doan's Pills today!

and knew about the old deserted cabin. When they came to the rocky ridge that sheltered it, they halted and stared down into the inky blackness, broken only by the burst of lightning.

"If I were Reed," Ed said, "I'd hole up there until daybreak."

A blast of thunder seemed to rip apart the night.

"I was thinking the same thing," Myra said.

THEY LEFT the horses hidden behind the ridge, and climbed down into the narrow valley. They found Reed's horse among some scrub pines. Because of the threat to Dave's life, they dared not storm the cabin. They crouched down on the wet rocks in the rain to plan how to save a small boy's life. In the end, Ed agreed to Myra's plan, but only because he could not devise a better one.

When gray dawn came, Myra sat alone on the rocks, facing the cabin. At last she saw her cousin and the boy step out and come toward her. The boy stumbled with weariness and fear. Reed held a gun in one hand, the boy by the other.

He saw Myra. He halted. Jerking the boy up close, he put the gun against the back of his head.

"I'll kill the boy if this is a trap," he said.

Myra stood very close. "I've come to ask you to let the boy go," she said.

Reed's eyes whipped about. "Don't anyone get crazy ideas!" he shouted. "Nothing can keep me from shooting the boy! Stay where you are, Myra."

She walked slowly toward him. He shifted the gun and aimed it at her.

"Go back and sit down," he said. "You're too close!"

He clicked back the hammer of the gun, and Ed leaped.

He came up from his hiding place behind a boulder like a striking snake. He crashed against the man's left side, throwing him off balance. He heard the gun explode. He heard Dave's terrified whimper, Myra's scream. And then he got his hands on Reed. It was like having his hands on a wild animal.

They clinched, rolled, and went tumbling down a short incline. For a moment, he lost Reed. Then he felt a boot against his leg, and reached out blindly.

They tangled and fought with a terrible concentration for some advantage in position. They slid down the steep, muddy bank of a ravine, a tangle of arms and legs.

Ed sprawled againset a tree stump. He felt the cold steel of Reed's gun against his face. He caught the barrel in his fingers and twisted it away from his face and toward the killer.

The gun exploded. It rocked Ed back against the stump. But he hung on, and suddenly the gun came free, and he felt Reed's body shudder and grow limp.

Myra and the boy were waiting for him by the boulders. It was still raining. The water slid from the rocks and sprang into the dark pools that dotted the ground. He stumbled over to where they stood and took them in his arms.

"Ed," Myra whispered over and over.

She was crying and clinging to him and Dave as if she never intended to let either one of them get away from her again. And Ed felt exactly the same way about her.

"Everything's all right now, Myra," he said, and pulled her wet face up against his.

RANCH FLICKER TALK

Movie News Roundup by BOB CUMMINGS—Next Issue!

A Review of Universal-International's

SMOKE SIGNAL

Starring DANA ANDREWS and PIPER LAURIE

PLUS

A Word and Picture Personality Sketch of

VICTOR MATURE

Women of the West

a fact story by

Kay Heistand

A HUNDRED years ago women definitely were not classed as the gentler sex. We discover this by consulting the Crockett Almanacs, which contain much native humor and traditional lore and which cast a new light on the gals of the backwoods.

Davy Crockett's wife was attacked by a bear once when she was on her way to meeting, so she "caught the scruff of his neck in her teeth. The bear shot ahead, and it stript the skin clean off him." She made herself a "good warm petticoat out of the pesky varmit's hide."

Another time a crocodile crawled into the home of a western heroine by the name of Sappina Wing. When the crocodile reared up and opened his mouth, Sappina got her dander up so she rammed a mop down his throat. He struggled and fought for five minutes and broke all her kitchen dishes with his tail thrashings before he died.

Once when Davy Crockett went courting he saw his lady love light into two bears that tried to attack her in the woods. Davy always declared, "Every blow she hit 'em was like a cupid's arrow into my gizzard." That was enough for Davy. He proposed shortly after, and was accepted.

Another frontier damsel broke a wolf's back with her wooden leg when it ambushed her on the way to church. Perhaps she was so brave, because she had for an example a friend who was walking through the forest one day and felt her garter break. She resourcefully robbed a rattlesnake's nest, knocked the head off one rattlesnake on a rock, then tied it briskly around her leg in lieu of a garter!

The backwoods woman also had her tender and frivolous side. One lady, Nancy Bowers, tamed a bear for a pet. It wandered into her kitchen one time and grabbed her while Nance was cooking supper. Nance immediately rammed a hot dumpling down the bear's throat, then licked him undercontrol. He became thoroughly domesticated in time, under her womanly touch.

Fashion-conscious ladies then had a great fondess for bearskin petticoats and mantles made of wolf skins. Mrs. Davy Crockett made two hundred bearskin skirts in two years and sold and traded them to other less fortunate women. Instead of feathers, a wildcat's tail made plumey trimming for many a go-to-meeting hat. Bear grease was a fine hair dressing, and rattlesnake rattles made decorative bracelets.

The first Easter after the annexation of Texas, Davy Crockett's wife, Sally Ann, wanted to make a large egg-nog in celebration. She climbed a hill to an eagle's nest to get the eggs.

There were so many eagles there that when they fought with Sally Ann to defend their nests the feathers flew like snow flakes. But Sally Ann got her eggs and made Davy his Easter egg-nog.

Times surely have changed since then—and I guess it's a lucky thing for most of us that they have!

JAKE BARDEN put his horse through the maze of brush-choked arroyos and eroded hogbacks of the brakes, and got to the mesa after a steep, plunging ascent.

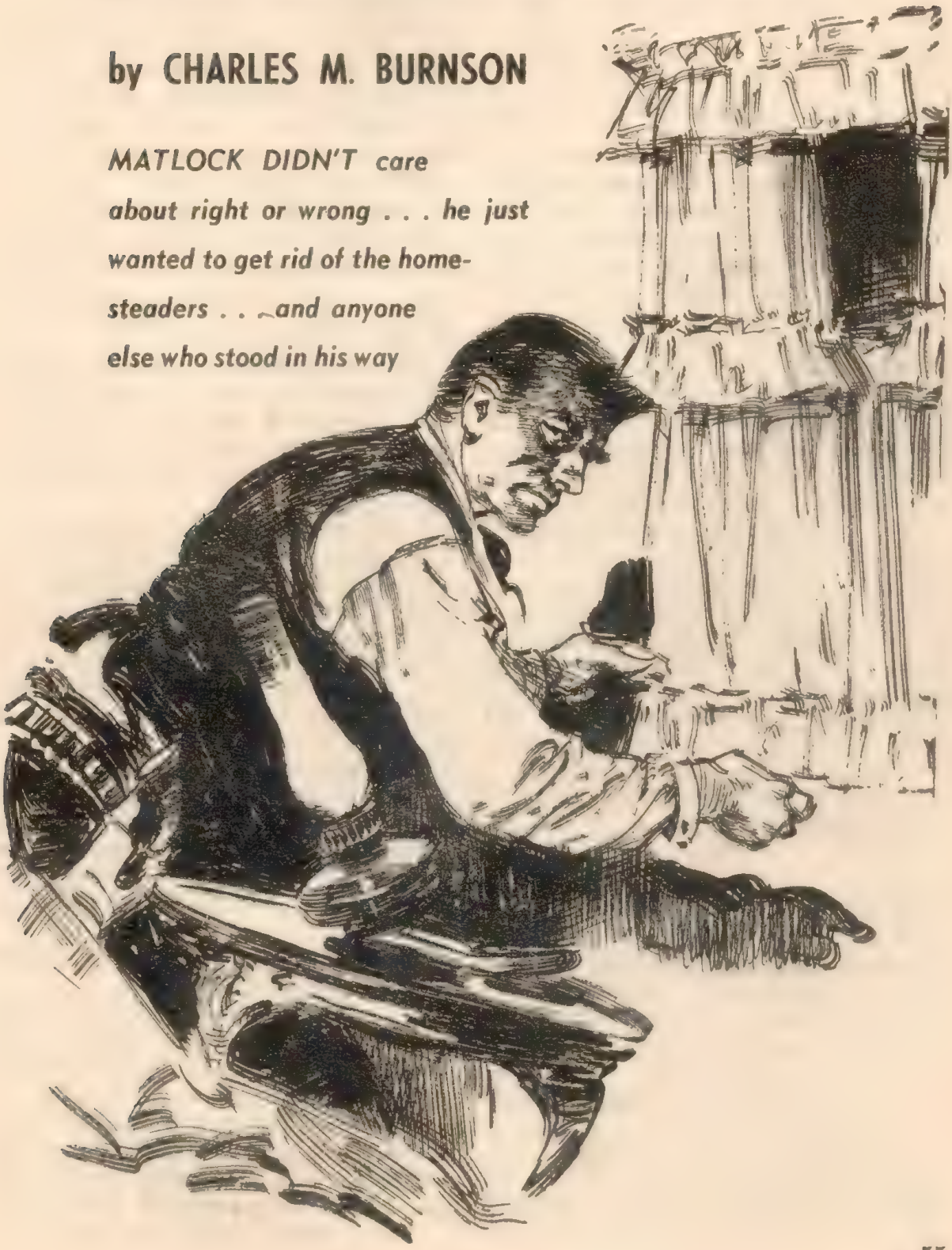
They were still there, he noted—the ragged kids, gaunt women, and horny-handed men, camping in tents beside their ponderous wagons. They were the psalm-singing sodbusters who refused to learn that the basin ranchers would fight the Homestead Act, as they had fought Indians, for their land.

Jake was moving around an alder thicket, skirting the camp cautiously, when he saw the three coffins. He thought, I didn't know the shooting had begun! That would be Matlock's doing, of course.

No Guns for SODBUSTERS

by CHARLES M. BURNSON

MATLOCK DIDN'T care about right or wrong . . . he just wanted to get rid of the homesteaders . . . and anyone else who stood in his way



Stars were growing brighter overhead when he cantered up the lifting grade into Fillmore. He racked up before Simmon's Mercantile and strolled into the lamplit store, a lean man of medium stature whose long face was etched deeply by lines of strain. Old Ham Simmons was showing some saddles to a Ramshead puncher, but Eleanor, Ham's daughter, was free and came out from behind the long counter.

"Don't tell me, Jake—I know," she said softly, so the Ramshead puncher would not hear. Though her manner was grave, Jake felt a sudden warm glow at her nearness.

"Just brought you a list Linda Crandall wants you to put up for her," he said. "I'll send for the stuff on Tuesday." He thrust a scroll of paper into her hand.

Ham Simmons shuffled over, clinking gold in one big paw. He inclined his head toward his office. Jake Barden, mildly irritated at the storekeeper's almost furtive manner, nevertheless followed him and took a chair beside him before a battered rolltop desk.

"I've seen the whole go-around before," Simmons said wearily. "I know how you cowmen feel—" his bloodshot eyes rested searchingly on Jake's impassive face—"but it seems to me men are not much different from wolves. You've got the biggest pack now, but these squatters will keep pouring in, and finally they'll take over. You've got land that'll raise wheat, and men will die for that."

"They have," Jake said briefly.

"I know. I'm neutral in this thing, Jake."

Jake thought, he's scared.

HE LET Simmons's remark go unchallenged, and returned to the street. The town was a blur of golden light and crowding purple shadow. Racks up and down the street were clustered with ponies, mostly bearing the Ramshead iron. Jake nodded to acquaintances, hardly seeing them, and entered the Golden Goose Saloon. He made his way to an empty table, carrying a bottle he had bought at the bar.

The crowded saloon was loud with boisterous talk and laughter, but there was a gloomy tinge to it. Jake thought, I suppose the gloom is in me, and wondered that a man's mind could color all he saw and heard.

Jinx Wiggins, one of Linda Crandall's X Bar wranglers, worked his way spryly through the poker tables and interrupted Jake's reverie.

"Linda is looking for you," he said.

Jake Barden poured a drink for Jinx, and idly shuttled his glance over the men in the saloon. Through the bluish smoke haze he spotted the hulking frame of Tracy Gram, the tough Ramshead ramrod whose hard, distempered face might have been hacked crudely out of a country ham.

Across the room the eyes of the two men collided, and Jake reflected, his boss, Duke Matlock told him to watch me, I'll bet. Matlock and Linda and I are supposed to be working together, but he figures we're just the tail to his dog, looks like.

"Muy malo hombre," muttered Jinx. "Ramrod, Matlock calls him." He spat viciously. "Hell, he's got the look of a brush-crawling backshooter to me, and those eight jaspers at his back don't even have rope burns on their hands."

"Don't talk too loud," murmured Jake.

He went out with Jinx, but left him and entered the lobby of the Sprague Hotel. He went up the stairs, taking three at each jump, and knocked briskly at a familiar door. Linda Crandall opened it, and he saw Duke Matlock, dark and suave, sitting in regal comfort on a horsehair chair, a long cigar jutting from the fingers of his hand.

There was a brief, oppressive silence before the dark-haired, dark-eyed girl, lovely in a revealing red velvet gown, spoke. "Duke had to act, Jake. They moved out onto the bottomlands near Indian Creek and started to build. There wasn't time to call in the rest of us."

"How many did you have to kill, Duke?" Jake asked brutally.

A meaningful look passed between Linda and Duke, and Jake felt intuitively that the two had been discussing him, with particular reference to his loyalty.

"You knew there'd likely be gun play," Matlock said levelly. "I warned those riffraff to stay off. They asked for what they got. Now they know we mean what we say."

"We?" snapped Barden, feeling the hot glow of anger seep into his veins.

Strange, he thought, but he's right. I did know this would happen, and now that it's come I can hardly stomach it.

"I don't like it, either, Jake," Linda said angrily. "But what are we to do, let them steal our land? What do you suppose Dad would have done if he were alive? He fought to get the X Bar, and he'd want us to fight to keep it. The Government has no right to give our land to these shiftless squatters!"

Rights, Jake thought bitterly. We're all savages, and the red stain of men's blood is on all our possessions. Why do we have to babble these moral platitudes as we kill? Rights and wrongs, all hogwash. It's root, snoot, or die, and the devil take the hindmost. People on our side are right, those against us are wrong, and the rest of it is just a hypocritical bleat.

"I'm your ramrod, Linda," he said firmly. "I'm in the game for keeps, and you can count on me. Matlock, keep in mind you aren't the only wheel on the wagon. You make one more move without our agreement or consent, and you're liable to find out that even the Ramshead outfit isn't big enough to stand alone."

Matlock's heavy face darkened, and his gray eyes flared ominously.

"I need you, and you need me," he said, with hard-held control. "It's that simple, Jake. We both know it."

Jake did not tarry long, not trusting himself. He returned to the rack before Simmons's Mercantile and stood there an uneasy moment, undecided as to his next move.

THE image of Linda was alive and vivid in his mind. He thought, if she asked me to bring in someone's head on a platter, I guess I'd do it. Her lips had looked swollen, almost bruised—probably from Matlock's kiss. Cursing, Jake threw down the cigarette he had just built, and ground it vengefully under his boot heel.

The voice of Eleanor Simmons penetrated his murky mood. She came from her father's store with her wonderful flowing stride, calling his name, and he turned toward her. Under the barred rectangle of light cast through the Mercantile window, her hair was a gleaming blond halo for the oval of her face.

She was going to ride part of the way with him, she said, to see a sick ranch woman.

As they left town they met Tracy Gram coming in on a lathered horse, and Jake wondered at this. The Ramshead ramrod must have left the Golden Goose just after he and Jinx went. Gram exchanged brief greetings with them, but glowered at Jake with undisguised rancor.

"That man!" exclaimed Eleanor, and shuddered. "I hate him!"

"News to me," said Jake. "The talk is that you and he have an understanding." And then, wickedly, "There's a saying love and hate are mighty close together."

"Yes, and there's another saying that cleanliness is next to godliness. But you'll never slide to heaven on a cake of soap. You tangled me on purpose, Jake, just when I was trying to tell you something."

There was a long silence, broken only by the sound of clopping hoofs and squeaking saddles.

Jake knew the circumstances of Gram's courtship of Eleanor Simmons. When Gram moved in, his rivals moved out—bitterly, perhaps, but without a fight. Gram was one of those men who seldom have to fight. Other men looked at him, saw the wild temper that lay banked in his eyes, noted his hulking shoulders and tremendous anthropoidal arms, and believed the rumors of his gun speed and killer instincts.

Eleanor was a loyal daughter to her father, who coveted the Ramshead trade. So she had not shown her distaste for Gram openly. Her father was getting all the Ramshead business now.

"Tracy Gram's a hard man to discourage, Jake," she murmured.

He said, "Eleanor, the X Bar's got a hell of a job now, to drive off those plowmen. I'm in on that battle and Gram is too. But if the big lout is stepping out of line with you, tell me so, and I'll make him sorry."

"I'm not in need of protection right now," she said. Then she changed the subject abruptly. "What's going to happen, Jake, with those homesteaders?"

"Same thing that's happened since the world was new, Eleanor. The wolf will eat the rabbit. I don't aim to be a rabbit—long as I can help it."

WHEN Jake got to the ranch Linda Crandall was standing on the porch, beckoning to him. He marveled at how she could make the world a mere background for her beauty.

"The homesteaders are still sticking as tight as a tick," he informed her. "And a new bunch—ten wagonloads of 'em—rolled through town and joined 'em at their camp. A queer mess of fish, they are. Matlock's gun play didn't spook 'em. They're talking rough and oiling up their guns."

A dozen riders appeared over the crest of a grassy hogback, and Jake and Linda watched silently as they filed in. Duke Matlock was in the lead on his big coyote dun, followed by the hulking Gram, his foreman, and a number of basin ranch owners. They were all falsely jovial as they trooped into the X Bar ranch house, but dissension broke out almost at once when they were settled in chairs around the big walnut table.

"We can't fight a small army," protested a wiry rancher named Ike Robles, owner of the Hashknife spread. "As I see it, if we were to let these folks go ahead and squat on the land that's fit for the plow, we'd still have plenty of grass. Most of our land isn't fit for farming."

The argument swirled then, bitterly, with three of the cowmen backing Duke Matlock, the others opposing him.

"Any nester that moves onto my land will be moved off—in a box, if necessary," Matlock said flatly.

"I say the same," said Linda. "If the rest of you don't stand with us, you'll have all the squatters on your grass."

They were deadlocked, then. Jake Barden noted that Matlock sat back and let the argument run its course. When the council broke up, no man present had changed his views.

"Let them honk and gabble," said Matlock, when the ranchers were gone. "You were talking about 'agreement and consent,' Barden. Think we'd ever get it from those yellow bellies?"

He spurred off, with Gram behind him.

"What's he up to, Linda?" Jake felt a chill, knowing Matlock was the kind of man who would not permit a tide of homesteaders to settle, even on the land of other men.

"I don't know. But you may be sure he's not going to stand tamely by and be robbed." She added, with spirit, "Nor are we!"

Jinx Wiggins rattled up in the buckboard, and Jake jumped in beside him.

"Linda," he said, "a good soldier, even when he figures to lick the enemy, goes into a fight with a plan for retreat. We'll have each and every X Bar hand file for a homestead on our land. That'll hold maybe a twentieth of the best ground."

"But Jake, can we trust them not to keep it for themselves?"

"Maybe," he said wryly. "Let's try 'em and see. Send 'em off to the land commissioner's office to file. You've got a land plot in your office. Pick the best bottomland sites and get rolling, or it may be too late. Besides, we're due to shove the beef off the badlands, and I'll be needing most of the hands to help me push 'em up on the mountain graze. So get the men off to town as soon as possible."

The buckboard's yellow spokes were spinning before he finished talking. Jinx Wiggins had cracked the blacksnake as an outlet for the indignation he felt at Linda's last remark.

THE vehicle jolted down through a stony wash and swayed up the lifting shelf of a hogback, and still Jinx made the whip pop and sing over the rumps of the galloping buckskin team. Jake signaled for a stop and the angry Wiggins pulled up before a clump of young aspens.

"Might be time for another look-see at the squatters' camp on the barrens yonder, Jinx."

"Watch sharp that you don't get your rump honeycombed with buckshot," warned Wiggins, his rare grin breaking out as he dallied the reins around the whipstock. "I'd better go along to keep you out of trouble."

A thick-set man waddled from the cover of a bramble thicket, a tin star glinting dully on his leather jacket. He eyed the pair on the buckboard cholerically, then holstered his gun. The man was Sheriff Sam Peters.

"I just had a horse shot out from under me," Peters said. He grunted with pain as he stepped heavily up on the wheel and onto the seat of the buckboard. "Just an invite to go away. I took it."

"I had to come, Jake," Eleanor said simply

He looked at the X Bar men with a slight defensive truculence, knowing the question of his courage was involved.

"I guess the squatters are trigger-itchy now, Sam," said Jake.

"Guess so. I figured to ask 'em their side in that ruction the other night. They're letting their guns talk for 'em from now on, it looks like."

The buckboard jerked forward.

"You sure it was squatter guns blasted down your cayuse, Sheriff? I'd think they'd want to talk to you. I would, in their place."

"Shots came from near their spring," said Peters, eying the X Bar ramrod strangely. That look said, plainer than words, Just whose side are you on, hombre? "But I'm not sure of anything."

Jake thought, and I'm not even sure you're a real sheriff.

With Fillmore as headquarters, Ham Simmons ran a string of high-poled, ten-mule freighters, for his own hauling and also for hire. More than half of the building that

housed his store was a warehouse, separated from the store only by a stout partition.

Jinx maneuvered the buckboard in beside the freight platform at the rear of the warehouse, and he and Jake commenced to load their supplies, which were stacked there.

Eleanor Simmons came around the store by way of the walk.

Jinx said, wiping beaded sweat from his leathery old face, "Say, you look like you'd worked up into a snit, gal."

She went straight to Jake. "Tracy Gram is—he's going to kill you!" she blurted.

Instantly Wiggins tossed Barden his gunbelt, and buckled on his own. Jake cocked his head, studied the girl's face.

"That might be hard to do," he said. Then, after a moment of silence, he asked coldly, "How would you know that? Did he say so?"

"No, but I know."

"That's a chancy guess, Eleanor."

"I'm not guessing, Jake. I know it, I feel it! He intends to kill you!"

The absolute conviction in her tone and manner silenced him.

Wiggins jabbed a bony finger against Jake's ribs.

"Listen, son, you've heard my opinion of that polecat. He's the kind that kills just to see 'em kick. She says he wants your hide, and I believe her."

"But why?" said Jake. "He's got no reason—"

"You damn fool," said Wiggins, with a trace of pitying contempt in his harsh voice.

"Well, there's one way to find out—ask him," rasped Jake, slapping the rosewood handles of his Colts. He loped around the corner of the building.

ELEANOR wheeled agilely and raced after him. She seized his arm, mute appeal in her eyes, as though what she had to let him know was beyond words. He stopped abruptly, sensing a queer, expectant silence in the streets. For an instant he juggled the mysteries in his mind, alert and uneasy as a rat that hears a snake crawling in its hole.

"Jake, you've got to believe me! Tracy Gram dropped in last night and asked me to marry him. I refused, as gently as I could. But he became furious. He said there was another man, and I said no, but he just laughed. He's seen us together, and he thinks you're the other man. Jake, please get out of town!"

Two clumsy lumber wagons were rumbling heavily up the grade, loaded with overalled men, all of whom carried rifles or shotguns. When Jake rounded the corner he was astonished to see that the main street of Fillmore looked almost deserted. Then he saw heads peering out from the cover of doorways. He hustled Eleanor inside the Mercantile.

A gangling, raw-boned old farmer, who was not carrying a gun, climbed out of the lead wagon and walked forward alone.

"We come peaceably," he cried. "We aren't men of violence. If there is any righteous man among ye, let him come forth and hear me."

The atmosphere had a pre-thunder feeling. Jake, as he faded toward the doorway of the Mercantile, was surprised to feel sweat suddenly beading his forehead. The farmers began to climb out of their wagons and deploy into a skirmish line, thirty men strong.

Jake knew how well this rash move of the nesters would suit the purpose of Duke Matlock, especially if the sodbusters could be goaded into a shoot-out here and now. If the farmers could be made to look like mad dogs, ranchers and townsmen would close ranks against them, united by hatred and fear. Prowling the street with his eyes, Jake noted that there were few ponies at the racks, though many ranchmen were in town—which proved that this invasion had been expected.

A trancelike silence reigned for seconds. Then someone yelled derisively, "Peaceably, eh? I hear you tried to murder our sheriff just a while ago. And those guns you're toting don't look like peace pipes to me."

The salvo of braying laughter that rang down the apparently deserted street had a nightmarish quality. The lone farmer gulped ludicrously, his Adam's apple bobbing.

"Woe be unto you if there be no righteous men among ye!" His voice cracked like a boy's, skittering up and down the scale from bass to treble, and again the chorus of cruel guffaws echoed in the street.

A rifle shot blared from an upstairs window of the Sprague Hotel. The old farmer twisted

and lurched backward, a dark blotch spreading over the shoulder of his hickory shirt. He turned to the men of his party and yelled, "My brothers, please, do not shoot!" Then he sank to one knee, with blood dribbling down his hand.

Sheriff Peters emerged from the batwings of the Golden Goose and charged up the street with an awkward gait.

"Where is Doc Feeny?" he bellowed. "Feeny, come out before this feller bleeds to death!"

The bandy-legged little pill slinger shot out of the door of his office and sprawled headlong in the road. Obviously, he had been pushed. The ridiculous incident touched off more laughter, which swelled as the pompous little doctor picked himself up, cast a glance of naked hatred at someone in the doorway, then minced toward the wounded farmer. He took over from Jake, Sam Peters, and several of the nesters. The bullet had penetrated the muscle just above the breastbone.

"A minor flesh wound," said Dr. Feeny.

THE farmer, gray-haired and seamy-faced, and possessing a quaint, austere dignity, submitted stoically as the wound was cauterized and bandaged.

"What manner of men be ye," he demanded, "who minister to the hurt of one stranger, but murder honest men under cover of night, and slay little children by poisoning the water of our spring?"

Sam Peters stared at him in slack-jawed stupefaction, looking like an old bulldog kicked by a mule.

"Poisoned?" he asked stupidly. "Poisoned?" Slowly his witlessness passed. "Now, feller, if you want the law to be on your side, how come you shot at me this morning?"

"No man among us did that," said the farmer. "We belong to a religious sect that forbids violence, and the taking of life for any cause whatsoever. The man who shot at ye was the same man who poisoned our spring."

Peters wagged a thick thumb at the heavy armament of the men outside the town.

"No killing, you say. Those men with you must be a passel of blackmailers, then."

"They are of a mind to violate their vows," said the farmer. "Three of our men were shot in the back. And now two of our women and one child have died of poison, and six children lie very ill in our tents."

Sam Peter's shoulders slumped, and his thick face went gray.

"Your men say, 'Give us law, or we'll make our own law.' That it?" And when the farmer nodded, Peters straightened his shoulders and said, "By heaven, you'll get your law! I promise you that the man who did these things will swing for it."

Ten minutes later the squatters were headed back for their camp.

Jake Barden went into the Sprague Hotel and tried to ferret out the identity of the man who had fired the rifle shot that had all but precipitated war. Sprague, the proprietor, said someone had jumped out of a window upstairs shortly after the shot was fired. He didn't know who it was.

Jake went through the hotel and into the alley, then across to the next street. Twenty Ramshead ponies were tethered to trees and bushes there—a dead giveaway that Matlock had anticipated the trouble with the nesters. He had known, then, about the poisoning.

Two shots exploded almost simultaneously, and Jake felt a scorching nip under his chin. He whirled with drawn gun in time to see Tracy Gram explode out of a thicket near the alley and head for Main Street. Jinx Wiggins appeared from behind Kramer's livery barn, and joined Jake in pounding futile shots after the plunging figure of Gram.

"I saw him stick his nose out of that hedge, and fired quick to rattle him," yelled Wiggins.

Together they burst into Main Street, now aswarm with men. Duke Matlock and six of his hardcases barred their way. Sam Peters shouldered through the hostile ring, purple with fury.

"Sam, arrest these X Bar men!" said Matlock. "Gram told me the pair of them jumped him and tried to kill him."

"You lying son!" barked Peters. "Gram grabbed a strange horse and batted out of town like the devil was after him. I know guilt when I see it."

"Gram tried to backshoot me," snarled Jake.

"If that's true, I'll kill him myself," said

Matlock. "If it's a lie, I'll have dealings with you, Barden."

He broke away, his men trooping after him.

"Sam," yelled Jake, "let's get on that slimy son's trail! Get some deputies, and let's make tracks."

Peters sidled close. "Jake," he said, "I'm one of Matlock's hired hands myself. So are my deputies. There are only a few men in town we could count on to back us. Stay out of this. Stay on your ranch. Don't ever let Matlock see your back. There's only one thing to do, and I'll do it—alone."

He loosed a rolling barrage of profanity as he trundled to the jail. The door slammed behind him with a crash that shook the whole building.

BUT it was only a short time before Sheriff Samuel Peters, still in a towering rage, stormed out of his office again, and fogged out of town, larruping his nag unmercifully. From the buckboard Jake Barden watched him long enough to be certain he had passed the fork leading north to the Matlock spread, along which Duke Matlock and his men had disappeared not ten minutes before.

Jake knew then that Peters was not after Gram. He must be heading for the town of Byerley, where there was a telegraph line. He must be aiming to call in a U. S. Marshal.

Night stained the air before the buckboard rolled into the X Bar ranch yard. Jake vaulted off the seat, landed running, and crossed the yard fast, almost colliding with Linda Crandall, who had just opened the door.

She came dreamy-eyed into his arms. The warm, quivering resilience of her heated his blood. Her arms slid about his neck, her lips fused with his, and he felt himself drawn deeply into the kiss.

"What's that for?" he asked, pushing her off to arm's length.

Her dusky cheeks were stained with hot color. A woman's responses, he thought, bemused, were like the weather. A man seldom guessed what was coming.

"Jake, darling," she cried, "a terrible thing has happened, and I had to face it alone. But when you came, suddenly I knew that I wasn't really alone, that you would always be here to help me. Jake, it's over, and I think we've won!"

"You hear what happened in town tonight?" he asked, baffled at her strange manner. "We haven't won. We've lost the whole game. Sam Peters himself has gone after a U. S. Marshal."

She studied him, a faint, wise smile curving her full red lips.

"All the same, we've won. Let me show you."

He followed her through the house and into a chintzy bedroom which had once been her mother's. On the bed sprawled one of the nester women, a tall, bony troll with staring, tragic eyes. The woman was oblivious of their presence. Jake had seen other females who had given way before the battering shock waves of hysteria and relapsed into just this sort of rigid, unseeing silence. His hand clasped Linda's arm with such force that she cried out sharply.

But she said, "She told me that the men want to fight, but the women want to leave. They're scared to death, like she is. If we give them some money for provisions the whole lot of them will pack up and roll."

Black rage rose up inside Jake Barden. He turned and walked heavily away, hands fisted, mouth grimly compressed. Sam Peters would be gone at least two days and the marshal, summoned by telegraph, probably wouldn't arrive within the week. If Linda were right, by that time the homesteaders would be long gone from the basin, not available to testify.

"Jake!" The girl was suddenly frightened. She hung onto his arm, and there were tears in her eyes. "I can't do this alone, Jake. Do you think it's been easy for me? Help me! I'm doing what Father would have wanted me to do, I know, or I couldn't have been strong. I would have let them steal the land." She was whimpering, near hysteria herself.

Icily he broke free from her, but still he felt the compulsion of old bonds—his years of loyalty to the X Bar, his long-lasting affection for Linda. He knew now that he had long been at war with himself, that he had entered this struggle carrying false colors. Almost he hoped that Linda would not accept

this repulse, that she would pursue him and break through his rebellion. For he knew that Linda was only a bewildered, lonely young girl. Suddenly he remembered how, when her father had been on his death bed, he had exacted a promise—"Say you'll stick by her always, Jake." He sheered away from the memory, which had become unendurable.

HE SAW a rider bulk blackly over a rise, and a moment later he recognized Eleanor Simmons.

"I had to come, Jake," she said simply, jumping off her horse and coming to him. "I know Tracy Gram better than you do. He's wild-tempered and vengeful—he's crazy now. Even Duke Matlock has learned that. Duke said he fired him, or rather that Gram didn't wait to be fired. And don't you see? Gram blames you for everything now!"

"What are you trying to tell me, Eleanor?" he asked thickly.

Her face was sick and contorted.

"I met him on the Byerly road tonight. I was coming back from the Indian reservation with some of the goods we buy from them, and he—he tried to make me go with him. A bunch of Hashknife waddies heard me screaming, and Tracy took off into the brakes."

Now he saw the purple bruises on her arm, and fury overcame him.

"Tracy Gram is crazy, all right, but not crazy enough to stay in this country after this! There isn't a man in the basin who wouldn't shoot him down on sight now. Even he knows that. And you are not going to do any more lone riding tonight. Get up to the house. Linda has room and to spare."

"You're not sure he's really gone, either, are you?"

"Get!" he said, and led her horse away.

The next morning Linda Crandall sent Eleanor to town in the company of six cowhands, who had been instructed to file on homesteads. Soon afterward Jake Barden came to the ranch house.

"I thought you were heading out to the badlands with the crew," Linda said.

"I put Jinx in charge. They'll just about get out to the camp and set up today. I'll join 'em late tonight."

She saw the three saddled horses then, one of them her own favorite chestnut mare.

"Bring the nester woman, Linda," Jake said. "We're calling on the homesteaders."

The three were moving off the trail toward the barrens when they heard a faint rataplan of horses' hoofs from the direction of Fillmore. In a moment six riders galloped around an upthrust of crumbling shale, Duke Matlock in the lead.

"Jake, you were dead right about Gram," he called. "He ran away last night, and that's proof enough for me. My boys have orders to kill him on sight. Right now, we're going in for a parley with the nesters."

"We had the same notion," Jake said.

"Linda, you weren't thinking of going along, were you?" asked Matlock, his brashness fading. When she nodded, he glared at the X Bar foreman.

The nester woman kept her horse in motion.

"You're not going, Linda," growled Matlock. "Those clodhoppers are half loco. I met Doc Feeny just now, and he told me two more of their kids died. No telling what'll happen now."

"From poisoned water," said Jake.

There was a naked ugliness in the words. Barden was aware now of the full measure of his hatred for Matlock. He did not doubt that Duke Matlock had given the order, and that Gram had carried it out. He clamped a stiff checkrein on his anger. Matlock had five men at his back now, all of them hardcases, authentic lead merchants.

"I'm not that low I would poison women and children, Barden," said Matlock, as if replying to an unspoken accusation. "Maybe Gram was, but I still can't make myself believe that." His bronzed hands hovered tensely over his gun butts, and his temper flared. "Barden, if you're not with us, you're against us! We'll settle that question right now!"

"Some other time, Duke," Jake said tightly. "One of your men tried for my back the other day, as you've just admitted. I don't like the odds now."

The dark, heavy face of the Ramshead boss creased in a forced grin. He spurred ahead, followed by his men. Linda and Jake fell in behind.

WHEN they reached the camp the homesteaders were waiting for them, barricaded behind their wagon corral, which bristled with guns. A slender, teen-aged girl with long yellow braids screeched piercingly, "Would you like to look at some dead babies, murderers?"

An old man seized her and carried her, kicking and screaming, back to the women.

Linda saw five new graves with wooden markers. Big tears welled to her eyes, and she cried out, "Oh, no!" while an ominous and bitter muttering swelled from behind the wagon barricade.

Jake flicked his eyes over the faces glaring at him from behind the barricade. He knew these farmers, for his parents had been just such folks—stern, scrupulous, conscientious people who lived close to the earth and wrested a living from it.

The loose-jointed old man who had faced the town alone and without a gun was a kind of preacher, and the others were brethren united under him in one of the religious sects the times had spawned. These folks had come here as to a promised land, and looked upon their present tribulations as an ordeal, a test of their faith, whose cardinal tenet was, "Thou shalt not kill."

Jake Barden knew that if they broke faith with that commandment, though, they would fight like so many devils out of hell. For they had an accumulation of grievances. They were farmers who had lost their land back East—overworked, poverty-ravaged people, victims of drought, low prices, grasping land owners.

Their leader stepped out. He spoke. "We have voted. We can't fight men who will do the things you have done. God forgive you."

"Pull into Fillmore early tomorrow morning," said Matlock, "and we'll give you provisions for your trek on west."

He yanked his horse to its haunches with brutal force, and spurred away.

Linda Crandall struck out for the X Bar, her head hanging. Jake, riding behind her, let the silence deepen, stubbornly waiting for her to speak first.

At last she said, "I'm almost unnerved by pity, Jake. I guess I know now what Dad meant when he said to me, 'There's times when you'll have to be tougher'n a bear's snoot!' "

"I'll be joining the boys, now," Jake said brusquely, and lifted his bay to a gallop.

He rode for hours, crossing the level stretch of mesa at a brisk pace, easing his nag to a lope as he entered the rugged, cut-up badlands. The mountains yonder, blue and indistinct across the miles of scorched, eroded soil, looked like stage scenery.

Lilac dusk had begun to steep the air when he found the X Bar camp, pulled up near a brush corral, and saw sour-faced Zeke Pinder, the cook, puttering around with the sourdough mix.

"Where's the crew, Zeke?"

"Jinx's horse wandered in empty-saddled toward sundown, Jake. The lads all took off to hunt for him. He said he was fixing to poke around near the spur." He smashed a gnarled fist against his crippled leg. "And I have to sit here!"

The formless dread that had haunted Jake Barden crystallized now into an instant certainty that Jinx was dead. He rode recklessly, cursing the impulse that had led him to take Linda into the homesteaders' camp.

NOW and then wild longhorns snorted and crashed away through the brush. Then the black silhouettes of riders bulked against the sky over a hogback, and he saw the blanket-rolled body packed across one of the horses. His lips went numb, his heart hammered.

"Don't look at him, Boss," one of the crew said soberly, as the men rode up. "His head's all mashed into a jelly."

But he looked. And he said icily, "Pack him in to the ranch, and lay him out in Miss Linda's front parlor."

"No, Jake, no!"

"Or draw your time," Jake barked harshly. He spurred down the trail, transformed into a cold, stalking animal with only one goal—to find Tracy Gram and Duke Matlock, and to kill them.

He chose a fresh horse at the brush corral and headed for town. For several hours he rode, too numbly dazed to think. This his mind began to churn, throwing up mutilated fragments of thought. Matlock, the engi-

neer of this whole pattern of disaster would be hard to get, especially as he certainly knew now that Jake would be after him.

The crafty Ramshead owner was always ringed with a small army of gunnies—except when he was with Linda! Jake cursed savagely. Matlock and Linda usually met at the Sprague Hotel, and it would be tough to get them there.

The pale glow of false dawn was bleaching the stars when Jake Barden reached the fork in the road. He debated briefly, then sloped down the trail to the X Bar. Three watchdogs bounded out and trotted silently alongside his horse, tails wagging. The windows of the old house gleamed leadenly in the faint light. He pulled off his gear and freed his jaded horse.

He moved stealthily to the porticoed porch and opened the door with his key. The parlor breathed a muggy odor of potted plants, old carpets, and leather furniture. The faint clink of his spurs was the only sound he heard at first, but there was a slice of yellow light under the closed door of the dining room, and sound seemed to be coming from there. Pressing close, he caught the subdued murmur of conspiritorial voices, made out words.

"That's right, Linda. Sheriff Peters was ambushed." That was the vibrant baritone of Duke Matlock. "What I figure is, Gram and Peters bumped into each other accidentally, and Gram drew first. Then he dragged the sheriff into the bushes, led his horse over to a cliff, and shot the critter so he would fall over the rimrock. Folks are going to raise hell over this, coming on top of what's already happened."

Then Linda's voice. "It looks like Gram deliberately set out to cut your throat, Duke. Cow country folks will understand, and will mostly back you up for driving nesters off your bottomlands, even if you had to kill to do it. But poisoning and murder—"

Ugly menace crawled into Matlock's voice. "You're in this as deep as I am, Linda. You backed my play, and every rancher in the basin heard you. Stick with me. We've still got a chance."

"What chance?"

"We can pin this whole deal on Tracy Gram. We'll stand pat, wait for the law to step in, then testify that Gram ran hog wild. He alone shot the three men, he poisoned the spring, he killed Sam Peters—on his own and against orders. And I'll promise you this—he won't be around to deny it."

"And the homesteaders?"

"They're leaving within a few hours. They'll be clean away before the marshal gets here—if he ever does. And now I've got to be moving. I've got things to do."

JAKE flung the door open.

"You're a liar, Matlock!"

He felt a reluctant admiration for Duke's cold nerve. The heavy rancher, after his first start of surprise, returned Jake's stare with a level glance, rock-steady and seemingly unafraid.

"Use your head, Barden," he said slowly. "You'll be taken care of. How'd you like to have your own spread, stocked with critters from my range? It's yours if you'll throw in with us."

"Listen, butcher. My boys are packing in the carcass of Jinx Wiggins—what's left of it. There's hardly any head on it. I'm going to kill you Matlock."

Matlock pushed back his chair and stood up. His pearl-handled Colts gleamed in the soft lamplight. He eyed Barden's right hand, watching for the first flicker of movement.

"No—no!" shrieked Linda, and hurled herself against Jake.

Matlock made a running dive through the window, while the girl fought Jake like a tigress. He tore free of her and sent her spinning over the table, but even as he did he heard hoofs thrumming. When he hit the ground outside Matlock flattened on his horse was far off and moving at a scorching pace. Nevertheless Jake pounded out shot after futile shot at the dwindling target.

The X Bar waddies had ridden up and dismounted. Stupefied by the explosive action, they stood gape-mouthed in the yard, holding the blanketed corpse between them.

"Lay him out in the parlor," Jake said again, and lunged toward the corral.

He was halfway to town when Linda and the crew caught up with him. The girl was stricken, white-faced beneath the black, wind-tossed banner of her hair.

When they reached Fillmore the main street was already aswarm with men. Matlock's gun-proud wolves were on the prowl, making a show of strength at this critical time. Many of the townspeople were coalescing into clusters here and there, disputing and gesticulating, and eying the gunmen with a mixture of resentment and dread.

Jake Barden wondered, why is it that a few resolute, ruthless men can cow a whole town? And then it came to him that perhaps they couldn't, now that Matlock's whole scheme was quivering on a razor's edge.

Eleanor Simmons was framed in the doorway of the Mercantile. Jake tied up at the rack and went over to stand beside her. Together they watched Linda vanish up the stairway of the Sprague Hotel. A grimace twisted Jake's face as he saw that four Ramshead gunnies were sprawled, leering and insolent, in the leather chairs in the lobby. Now he knew where Duke Matlock was.

"Jake," said Eleanor, clutching his arm. He felt the flutter of anxiety in her hands. "What's happened to you?"

"Gram killed Jinx last night. He was looking for me, of course." He spoke with the voice of a dead man. "I'm quitting the X Bar. I'm through in this country and through with it."

He stared stonily ahead, his mind focused on means for getting Matlock under his gun. If he lived through that he could nose out Gram's trail and stay with it until he ran the man to earth. It hit him abruptly that Gram couldn't escape over the mountains and across the desert. More likely he would backtrack and head for Byerley.

HAM SIMMONS'S silver thatch poked through the door. The storekeeper's hands shook with nervous tremors, and his voice quavered.

"Eleanor, get inside the store! Can't you see the lid's about to blow?" He pulled roughly at her bare arm.

"Get away from me, Father," she said waspishly.

Ham recoiled, pasty-faced and slack-mouthed, then retreated into the gloom of his store.

Jake shifted his attention to the shuttling traffic on the boardwalks. He sensed that the contention was over, that Matlock's point of view had prevailed. After all, the Ramshead boss had some mighty potent arguments in the holsters of his men.

The mule-drawn homesteader wagons hove in sight.

"Eleanor," said Jake, "when I was young, my folks were told to get off their land, back East. The men with guns came, but Pa wouldn't budge, nor would Ma, so they fought and were killed. A big land owner held title, and we were just squatters. I decided then that only fools locked horns with big people. The way to get along was to serve the great and powerful ones, and take the crumbs they dropped from their tables."

Eleanor was watching the wagons, the sleazily-dressed women, the ragged, tow-headed kids, and the ungainly, bib-overalled men.

"You belong here, Jake," she said. "We need men like you. Oh, I wish I was a man!"

"I'm glad you're a woman."

"Then I'm glad, too."

"When Jinx told me I was a damn fool, I didn't know what he meant. Elly, for what it's worth, I love you. I reckon you knew that before I knew it myself."

"I didn't know. But I believed it because I wanted it to be so."

Ham Simmons was scuttling about in the store now, wringing his hands. Jake heard his shoes sluffing the floor and turned, amazed at the man's extremity of sweating fear. He went into the store and old Ham quailed back from him, his florid face working.

"What's eating you, Ham?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing." Simmons busied himself at the hardware bins, turning his back to the X Bar ramrod and fumbling clumsily at a keg of nails. "Nothing at all."

Jake strode deeper into the store, prowling suspiciously among a jumble of barrels.

"Hey!" yelled Simmons in a choking voice.

Jake kept going. He opened the back door cautiously and moved into the purple darkness of the warehouse, walking silently and slowly upon his toes.

The cavernous place smelled of trapped heat, raw lumber, pitch, and stored bolts of yard goods. He groped about, letting his eyes

adjust to the darkness, cocking his head and listening intently. Above the faint groans and creaks natural to the building, he thought he detected the sibilance of irregular breathing.

He thought, if it's Tracy Gram, he must be almost crazy with fear. I'll play the waiting game.

He eased into the shelter of a stack of nail kegs pulled his gun and waited. With every passing moment the dark shapes about him took on sharper outlines, clearer forms.

THE wait was brief. An ax blade hissed viciously past his head, thunking with a dull ring against the keg near his right ear, gouging his arm with a bone-sickening impact.

A keg of nails whizzed at him. He sidestepped convulsively, heard it burst its staves and spew a bright wedge of jingling nails across the planks. Groping blindly, he cracked his head against a corner brace and felt the floor rise up and belt his rear with spine-splintering violence.

For an instant Jake Barden sat there, his ears roaring, the midnight before his eyes laced with gaudy, rocketing streaks. Then he went to all fours. Another ax blade was arcing at him like a fire streak as he spun giddily back on rubbery legs, jerking his gun up.

In the brief, instant brilliance of its muzzle flame he saw the contorted face of Tracy Gram, heard the thunderous boom of the gun, the collision of ax blade on gun-barrel, felt the glancing flash of the ax blaze along the corrugations of his ribs. Then he and Gram grappled and spilled to the floor, punching and gouging. Jake's second gun fell from its holster and slithered across the planks.

He was on his back, with Gram sledging huge fists into his face and belly. His ribs and guts seemed to collapse together like a folding telescope. A savage clout with all the bigger man's weight behind it caught him squarely between the eyes. Raging agony exploded in his skull.

Instinctively he marshaled his fading powers into one surging, twisting convulsion. The desperate maneuver toppled Gram, and the two cartwheeled like dervishes, grunting and snarling bestially through clenched teeth. A stack of barbed wire spools arrested their dizzy gyrations, with Jake on top.

He hammered Gram's face with the force of desperation and hatred in every punch, pounding blow after blow until he felt the gross hulk under him go limp. Sheer exhaustion ended his assault. He was not aware that bloody flesh hung in shreds from his lacerated knuckles, nor that a bright stream of blood seeped from his gashed ribs and trickled down his jacket. The fierce ecstacy of unleashed fury excluded every other impression.

He rose to his feet, weaving and lurching drunkenly. He saw the dull glint of his gun, bent to scoop it up, and again the floor rose and crashed into his face. Now pain lanced through him; throbbing, clawing agony wrenched screams through his gritted teeth. A coal of living fire burned in his right lung.

When he fought to his haunches, he felt the gun beneath his sticky hand, and holstered it automatically. He would never remember how he got through the warehouse door and into the store.

Doc Feeny, spruce and chipper, was coming in from the street with mincing steps when Jake entered the store. The ramrod's first clear impression came minutes later—a view of raw black rafters under the roof. He was on a cot, stripped to the waist, and whisky fumes were biting like vitriol into his nostrils.

He sat up.

"My guns!"

FEENY wheedled and scolded old-maidishly, but Jake rolled off the cot, demanded a new shirt, and wrestled into it, biting his shredded lips against the spurts of pain. He strapped on his gun belt.

"Go get Gram," he said curtly.

"Gram?" muttered Simmons crazily. Then he sagged, turned, and shambled back to the warehouse.

Jake left the place and angled across the street, making straight for the lobby of the Sprague Hotel. Matlock's four gunmen rose, grinning nastily.

"The party's over, boys," Jake said. "I just got Gram. When he talks, there'll be a bounty on your hides."

The skinny, bald-domed hotel clerk slid out of sight behind his desk.

"That's loco talk," said one of the gunmen. "Looks like your brains as well as your face are scrambled. The Ramshead isn't responsible for Tracy Gram, and you know it."

But all four exchanged sidelong glances.

"Gram was acting under Duke Matlock's orders," Jake said grimly. "The boss gave the word, and his mad dog did what he was told to do. There will be a heap of hides nailed to the fence, and damn soon. If you boys are smart you'll leave town now."

He backed out and returned to the Mercantile. A pair of X Bar waddies stopped and stared open-mouthed at his mutilated face. He beckoned, and they followed him into the store. Gram was inert on the cot.

"He's coming to now," muttered Doc Feeny, administering smelling salts.

Men were swarming at the window now like bees, and some began to trickle inside, gawking and exclaiming.

"Who is it? Why, it's Gram! His mug looks like a bowl of chopped stew meat."

"Gram? How'd he get in here?"

"Who did this to him? He looks like he'd tangled with a catamount."

The excited cries sent a thrill of menace down the street.

Jake kept his eye on the Sprague lobby. He saw one of the gunnies sprint up the stairs. The bedlam in the street mounted. The area before the Mercantile became jammed with people, and the doorway was a tightly-compressed mass of squirming figures. But Eleanor was nowhere in sight. Jake wondered about that, uneasily.

"Confess and I'll protect you, Gram," said Jake. "Keep your lip buttoned and I'll throw you to the wolves."

The killer came up on all fours like a wolf at bay. He panted hoarsely, "I only did what I was told to!" A low, animal cunning appeared on his face. He raised his voice, calling, "Duke! Duke! You told me you'd get me out of here!"

Jake turned his attention back to the hotel. The four gunmen were pounding through the lobby, heading for the rear exit. Jake collared Ham Simmons and pushed the storekeeper into his office.

"Where's your daughter? What have you done with her?"

He saw her then, gagged and tied to a heavy bench in the corner. He pulled out his bowie knife and slashed her bonds. Hal Simmons slacked soddenly into his swivel chair, groaning.

He blurted, "Matlock promised me two thousand dollars if I'd smuggle Gram out of the basin. I was fixing to hide him in an empty hogshead and carry him to Byerley in one of my freighters. The girl didn't know he was hidden back here. I couldn't let her find out. That's all I did—just hid him."

Eleanor was in Jake's arms, muffling her convulsive sobs against his shoulder. Gently he pushed her away. He had some unfinished business with Matlock. He went through the warehouse, out the freight door, and around the store. The Sprague lobby, he saw, was now deserted.

HE CROSSED to the hotel, went in, and climbed the stairs. Linda's door was locked. At that instant the sound of a gun hammer being thumbed back came from the doorway of the room directly across the hall. He stiffened. Matlock had outmaneuvered him!

"Jake," purred Duke Matlock, "Linda broke our engagement. You finally took the starch out of her, throwing Jinx's carcass right in her face the way you did. Well, I can always get another woman. All I want now is to keep that human vermin from crawling all over my land."

"Duke, you're loco. Even your own men will pull out on you now. You can't buy men to back you in a tight like this. Gram is talking, and half the town is listening."

"I've lived through worse," said Matlock. His voice was not good to hear. "I had to cool Linda off just now. I always figured she was soft on you, you mealy-mouthed traitorous son!"

The steel snout of his gun pointed at Jake's spine. He pulled the gun from Jake's holster and shoved him toward the stairway. Forcing him down the steps, they went out the rear exit, where three Ramshead riders waited with spare ponies. They all rode together to the end of the alley.

A crowd had ringed the homesteader wagons, which were preparing to move out.

Matlock growled contemptuously. "If it weren't for my men and their guns, the rest of the town—the ranchers, too—probably would tell the homesteaders to go ahead and squat here in the basin. But when those sodbusters haul their freight, those same yellow bellies will be thanking me. I'll be bigger than ever, once this fuss blows over. And I know Linda—the same puff that blew her from me will blow her back. Not that you'll live to see it, Barden. You're going to prove up on a cozy little homestead six feet long and six deep."

With a sick fascination, Jake Barden watched the crowd. The merchants there among them would benefit from the added revenues of settler trade. Too, most of the ranchers realized now that it would be better to accept the nesters at the present time than to have them forced down their throats later. And yet, even after Gram's confession, the presence of those mercenary guns was stalling off the inevitable. Not a man in that crowd dared to step out against the threat of Matlock's guns.

But a girl did dare. Eleanor Simmons emerged from the press of milling people, climbed over the front wheel of a wagon, and began to speak. Almost at once it was clear that she had called an empty bluff. Her silvery voice carried clearly across the square.

She told of Gram's confession, flatly accused Matlock of terrorism and murder, and summed up, "Surely we have men right here who can clean up our own back yard!"

Matlock's face went livid. He saw his men skulking back toward the fringes of the crowd, moving prudently toward their horses.

"That little hellcat!" he shouted, and was spurring forward when Jake dived headlong from his saddle.

MATLOCK'S panicked horse bounded sideward as the two men grappled. They spun off together and slammed onto the hard ground. Matlock tried desperately to wrench his gunhand free, and cried out hoarsely to his men.

One of them, a red-headed, solemn-faced man, said judiciously, "Duke, you aren't right in the head—you just aren't. So long. I'll be making tracks now."

Jake felt his strength ebbing as his wounds split open and began to bleed afresh. Matlock slugged deliberately at Jake's chest wound. His gun was moving remorsely to aim at Barden's head, and Jake frantically tried to arrest the quivering, fatal progression.

One of the Ramshead riders dismounted and ripped Matlock off his bleeding victim, flinging the rancher's gun into the dirt.

"Fair's fair," he grunted. "This ranny's too crippled up to have a chance in a tussle. Settle your spat with guns, like gents ought to."

Matlock looked up dazedly as the wagons began to roll, some back through town, others toward the Ramshead and Hashknife spreads, still others southward. Duke felt a rider shoving a gun into his holster, and saw another one hand Jake Barden a gun.

Jake watched warily, then stabbed for his weapon, and triggered as he heard Matlock's gun bellow. A giant hand pounded his shoulder, twisting him sideward. He saw Matlock sinking jerkily to his knees, a scarlet blossom blooming across his white shirt. He was fighting grimly to bring his gun up again.

Jake's second shot hit Duke Matlock between the eyes. Then the big man slacked forward, his face plowing in the powdery dust of the road.

The last two Ramshead gunmen to stand by mounted, shrugging their shoulders.

"I saw he had a busted flush," remarked one of them. "Well, Barden, we'll be leaving now."

Somehow then, Eleanor was there, helping Jake walk to Doc Feeny's office. Feeny cut away his shirt, remarking that the patient would live if he didn't bleed to death. Linda came in, and Jake saw how Duke had "cooled her off." The point of her jaw was puffed and purple, but he felt nothing for her.

Eleanor was beside his cot. Jake looked into her eyes and experienced a falling sensation. It stopped when he looked away from her.

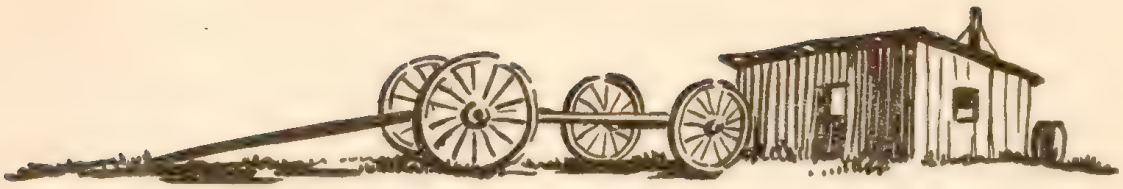
"Don't say it, Jake," she whispered. "I know." They kissed.

IF SHE MARRIED the trail boss, Joyce could keep her ranch

. . . but she wouldn't marry him if he were the only man on earth!

She Said She

Joyce put the calf across the saddle horn and swung up behind it



Hated Texans

By Theodore J. Roemer

SHE stood in the long prairie grass facing the slow-rising dust cloud to the southwest. The rifle balanced in her sun-browned girlish arms had an expert tilt to it.

The never-ceasing Kansas wind billowed her gray dress out from her, then pressed it against her lissome body in whimsical sweeps, but she paid no attention to it. Her clear gray eyes were held steadily on that dust cloud which she knew was made by a herd of Texas cattle being driven to Abilene.

When the vanguard drew near and the man riding point on that side approached her, she shifted the rifle with unmistakable suggestiveness. Her horse behind her whickered, and the dusty Texan's horse answered. The man, who had seen the girl on the hill for miles back, rode toward her.

"Ma'am, anything wrong?" He was a dried-up, whiskery man who oddly resembled, the girl thought, sun-cured rawhide.

Joyce Barden said, "Nothing wrong if you bear straight north and ford the Rattlesnake two miles up."

"But we're heading for Abilene, Miss, and the trail is that way." He pointed across the luscious. green sweep that the Rattlesnake River made in the distance behind the girl.

"That's my range," she said crisply, "and I don't want any Texas cattle crossing it and dropping off fever ticks for my stock to pick up and get sick on."

The man shoved back his hat and scratched his head. "Shucks, Miss—"

At that instant a big jackrabbit, startled from its burrow by the Texas leaders who had stopped to graze at the long grasses, bounded across the green. Joyce lifted the rifle to her shoulder and, barely seeming to aim, pulled the trigger. The rabbit leaped into the air and fell dead. The shot was over a hundred yards away. Before the sound of the explosion died she had levered another shell into the Winchester.

"See what I mean?" Her pretty lips were set in a firm line.

The man closed his gaping mouth slowly. Shouts arose from behind him. The cattle were bunching up. Three men came up fast on their dusty Texas mounts.

The leader shouted, "Buster, keep 'em moving!"

Then he saw the girl. He pulled his mount to a halt on its haunches, the two men behind him almost ploughing into him. He took a second look

at the girl in the billowing gray dress, at her figure beneath the tight-fitting basque, at the wavy brown hair and direct gray eyes, and he swept off his tall hat. She saw golden glints shine in the ragged, long hair.

He said, "What's the deal, little lady? Something wrong?" He had beautiful teeth. They flashed in the sun-browned tan of his face.

Joyce stiffened. There was arrogance in this Texan, a pride in his own strength and power to do things, and at once she set herself against him. She stood tall in her own right and faced him directly.

"This is my range, the Clover R. I'm not taking any chances on my cattle getting Texas fever. Take your herd west to the ford, then stay north of the river."

"And lose half a day's drive?"

Joyce shrugged. "Would you rather have a broken arm—or worse?" She moved the rifle easily.

"Watch out, boss. That gal can shoot."

The young Texas trail boss grinned thinly, then let his eyes rove over the almost empty expanses of the Clover R. "Seems you haven't got many cattle to lose, Miss."

"Never mind about that," she said. "You going to turn your herd?"

He gave her another look, a long one from head to foot. His hard grin softened. "Why, sure, miss—or is it ma'am? We'll be glad to oblige." With the ease of a Texan he lifted his stocky quarter-horse to a run, and in a moment the four riders had turned the mottled gaunt longhorns toward the distant shiny ford two miles to the west.

JOYCE watched them until she was sure they were going, then caught up her horse. The men were far enough away now so that she could ride astride in the stockman's saddle, her long slim legs showing halfway to her thighs. She saw a sprinkle of flour on the back of one hand and, with a small smile, she brushed it away on her horse's shiny black neck. She had been baking cookies for Sammie when she'd spotted the dust cloud, and she hadn't even taken time to wash up.

Now she lifted the reins and turned her horse toward the low cluster of buildings near the sweep of the river. But at once she drew the animal down once more. A sound had caught her ear. She faced the wind, cocking an ear. She fixed the point from which the sound had come, and rode that way. A knobby-legged red-and-white calf was trying to stand erect in the long grass to follow the now-distant herd. Joyce sprang off her horse.

"You little thing," she cried. "You want to go but you can't make it, so they left you behind." She lifted the helpless calf in her arms and stood in indecision for a long moment. She knew many of calves were born along the way and couldn't keep up. Cowboys gave these dogies away or had to shoot them, to get the mother cow to go on with the herd.

"You can't make it with them, even if I took you to them. And if I leave you here, you won't last one night against the coyotes." Moving with the characteristically swift decision, Joyce placed the calf across the saddle horn and swung up behind it. With rifle, reins and calf in her arms, she turned the black mare toward her ranch buildings, loping easily over the prairie.

Sammie, her eleven-year-old brother, was in the big corral by the half-sod, half-cottonwood-log barn. He had a rope around a black colt. The mare nickered, and the sweaty colt answered.

"Sammie, for Pete's sake let that colt alone. He'll hurt you."

"Me? Shucks, what do you think I am, a kid? What you got there?"

"A dogie the herd left behind."

"Don't know why you brought that here. You're selling off our own cattle, then the ranch. Hell, ain't no sense in it."

"Watch your language, young man. When we live in town you can go to school and learn correct things."

"I don't want to live in Hill City. And getting schooling from Mr. Higgins in the wintertime is good enough for me. If pa'd stayed alive he wouldn't make me go to school in Hill City."

Joyce sighed, and put the bawling calf in the small corral. She'd been through all these arguments with Sammie a hundred times, but

he was a wilful youngster, maybe as she was. And both had gotten it from their headstrong father.

At the door stoop she looked across at the river, where the rapids were roaring loudly again. There must have been a storm up in the hills again, to make the Rattlesnake roar like that. The treacherous river had made just such a sound the night her father drowned, three months ago. He'd brought back some runaway horses from the north bank, arriving at the river at nightfall. Risking the ford at the narrow rock ledge, Charles Barden had lost his life. Either his horse had lost its footing, or a down-floating log had struck him into the rapids.

Joyce shivered now as she remembered finding her father's body. She had tried to carry on but, with only eleven-year-old Sammie to help her and no money to hire outside labor, she had finally taken the advice of Mr. Thornton, the banker in Hill City. She was selling out.

ALMOST all the cattle were gone now. Mr. Thornton had handled them without taking a cent of commission. He would do the same in selling the ranch for her.

"On the proceeds of the sale you and Sammie can live in civilization for once," he had said. "You are too pretty, Joyce, to be buried out on this God-forsaken place. You are eighteen now, and maybe this winter I can get you work teaching school in town."

Joyce thought of all these things as she looked around the windy prairie. Then, with a sigh, she went into the kitchen to resume baking those cookies.

The cookies baked, she scrubbed the kitchen floor and washed the lamp chimneys. As dusk crept on, she began peeling potatoes for the evening meal.

After a while she wrinkled her slightly uptilted nose in puzzlement. Was she imagining things? It sounded as if there were voices outside. She went to the door.

Shock brought her up motionless. The Texas trail foreman was talking to Sammie, who had again brought out the colt and was trying to gentle it.

Joyce was about to call sharply to Sammie, when she checked her words and watched. The tall Texan was slowly walking around the snubbing post, hands open and down in front of him. He was talking in a quiet voice, speaking as much to the horse as to the wide-eyed boy.

"You gotta go easy with 'em, son, like this. Show 'em you aren't going to hurt 'em. Make every move slow and in the open, where he can see you. Slide your hand up the rope slowly. Get him used to you in front. We call it Indian-gentling a horse. Later, lots later, you can come with that bridle and blanket and saddle. You're rushing things too much, son." He stopped as he saw the girl approaching.

Joyce said, "What are you doing here?"

He had his hat off. "You sure look pretty, miss, with that color in your cheeks."

She lifted her chin. "I asked why you are at the Clover R."

"Bub, here, told me you were a miss, ma'am. I'm glad. My name's Grant Leggett, from Clay Bank, Texas. I'm an independent cattle buyer and driver. Third trip up here, but first this way. I'm sure happy."

She felt the red creep up her neck, staining her cheeks more deeply. There was no mistaking the open admiration in his hazel eyes.

"I'm sure I'm not interested in who you are." She stopped as she saw the brindled old longhorn cow at the small corral gate, licking her calf through the poles. "Oh, you came for your calf."

"Trailed my cow over. She crossed on the rock ford below here, and I did the same. Reckon you didn't mean to steal a cow." He grinned.

She took a deep infuriated breath. She didn't know why, but this tall drink of water from Texas certainly got under her skin with his forward, easy ways. "I did not. I was just saving it from the coyotes. You can take your cow and calf and get!"

"Aw, Sis," Sammie said. "He was showing me how to gentle Black Star. He's real good at it. I even invited him to supper."

"Supper?"

"I thought it real nice of Sammie, and I accepted. Of course—"

But she was walking back to the house, very angry and very stiff.

THE meal was one of utter silence for Joyce. But Sammie and Grant Leggett talked at length about breaking riding horses, and Leggett's eyes were very observant. They saw the scrubbed floor, the well-built fieldstone chimney, the shining array of kettles. With his after-supper smoke he leaned back, his scuffed boots outstretched, and looked at the peeled logs—the walls and the ceiling. He saw the red chintz curtains, the hanging rifle, the framed needlework, the coyote skins. He sighed deeply once more and stretched his legs farther.

Joyce could have bitten off her tongue.

Finally he arose. He and Sammie seemed to have talked themselves out. She had her dishes finished and was drying her hands.

"I thank you for the fine chicken pie." He reached for his hat, his eyes on her trim figure. She compressed her lips and didn't answer, and Sammie got out the lantern.

"I'll help him saddle up, Sis."

They went out.

Joyce stood at the window, angrily drumming her fingers on the sill. That man had more arrogance than all the other men she'd ever known.

And then a sound came to her ears. The roar of the rapids!

With hardly a thought she ran outside. She saw them at the corral, a short rope around the longhorn's neck, the calf tottering behind. "Wait," she cried.

Grant Leggett turned as if he had been dawdling along anyway, hoping to see her.

"You can't cross that rocky ledge with two feet of water racing over it and a cow being pulled behind."

"Why not? I was going to carry the calf. Say, Sammie, I reckon I forgot my sack of tobacco on the clock shelf. Will you fetch it for me, like a good boy?"

"Sure." Sammie was off like a shot.

Joyce said, "Mr. Leggett, you can cross if you wish, but it's night and you're a fool to—" He had stepped forward and suddenly his arms were around her. The next instant she felt the hardness of his lips on hers.

She was so astounded she was limp. Then she felt his lean fingers press into her body. They were warm through the thin cotton of her dress. She felt him drawing her closer and closer, felt his lips grow warm and seeking.

She flung her head back, arching herself away like a tigress. Her open hand came up and caught him across the cheek. She felt the blurring sting of his day-old whiskers.

"You beast! How dare you!"

He laughed a short, breathless laugh. "I just wanted to make sure, that's all."

"Can't find it, Grant," Sammie called.

"Never mind, son." Leggett swung into the saddle of his powerful dun. "Sweetest kiss I ever had, Miss Joyce. As of now I'm putting in my order for more of them." He kneed the dun and disappeared into the darkness toward the rapids, the old cow following peacefully, with the calf at its side.

Sammie came running up. "Gee, isn't Grant swell?"

She didn't answer. All she could do was stare furiously into the darkness with her hands clenched.

Sammie said, "Shucks, he isn't afraid of the rapids. He's a real man, Sis, like my pa was. Say, why don't you marry him? Then we could stay on this place. I saw him kissing you. I think he likes you."

"You get in and get to bed!" She snatched up the lantern and swung an angry hand at the seat of his patched pants. The roar of the rapids came loud in the night. She tried to close out the sound. I don't care what becomes of the big, conceited, overbearing fool.

SHE was baking flapjacks the next morning when Sammie came running into the kitchen crying, "The cow! It's back."

Joyce said, "What are you talking about? Had it run away?"

"No, I mean *his* cow, the one with a calf."

She dropped the pancake turner into the batter and ran to the door. "My God," she prayed, "not another drowning!"

There the mossy old longhorn cow stood, short rope dragging, the red-and-white calf at its side.

For an instant her heart didn't move. Then,

without waiting to saddle her black mare, she started running across the prairie in the bright morning sunlight.

The ford with the rapids below it was a quarter of a mile from the ranch buildings. When she and Sammie reached it her heart was pumping wildly and she was out of breath, and not only from the long run. She remembered finding her father on a morning just like this.

The green rushing water was still running strong over the rock ledge. In ordinary times or dry spells it served as a bridge, and the rapids below were but a trickle of water. But when there had been a storm in the hills where the Rattlesnake began, this ford was a killer. Standing on the grassy bank with her knuckles pressed against her cheeks, Joyce stared down at the green sheet of water.

"Halloo!" a rough voice sounded among the willows across the stream. It was the rawhide oldster, chousing out cattle from the river breaks. Evidently they'd busted loose from the herd last night and sought water.

Joyce caught up her breath. "Did you—is your trail boss in camp?"

The man sat his horse and grinned. "I reckon, ma'am. I saw him stowing away beans by the bushel a while back. Did you want to see him?" His toothless grin widened.

She let out her breath, suddenly. So he had made it across safely last night! He had let go the cow when he'd seen he couldn't get it across. At once she felt all her anger at the man return. He had made a fool of her. He had daringly crossed a strange and dangerous ford at night, scoffing at her fears, and he had won. He was probably laughing at her right now!

She said to the grinning man across the river, "No, I certainly do not want to see him." And, turning, she marched back across the sunlit prairie to the ranch buildings.

The pancakes were burned; the house was full of smoke. Sammie said, "Gee, he's a man, Sis. I'd like to stay on here and ranch with him."

"Sammie, we're going to sell out and move to Hill City if it's the last thing I do. Now get out and milk that cow!" She flung the burned cakes into the firebox and viciously poured new batter onto the greased griddle.

Strangely, her anger continued all that day. And oddly she tied in with Grant all the forces that wanted her to retain the Clover R. Sammie wanted to stay, now more than ever. She wanted to close her eyes to her own feelings—the call of this empty, enchanting land to her heart, the daily crying of the winds through the grasses, the love her father had had for the place and which he had transmitted to her, the cattle on the green grass, with the Rattlesnake shimmering in the blue distance.

BUT now she fought against these feelings. She closed her mind stubbornly to them.

At dinner Sammie said, "Gee, Sis, I did just as Grant says, and now I have no trou-

SNOW NO!

By LIMERICK LUKE

A cowboy in cold Minnesota
Loved a Texas cowgirl, so he wrota:
"Come north with me dear—
Love melts snow up here!"
But the girl didn't melt one iota!

ble getting the hackamore on Black Star. I've been thinking, Joyce. You sell this ranch and we got nothing but some money in the bank. Now if you'd marry Grant—"

Joyce said with constrained patience, "Sammie, you don't marry a man on one day's notice, even if you like him. We know nothing about him."

"I do. He's a cattle buyer. Makes money every herd he trails up here. Saved it too, he said, looking for a ranch to buy. He told me that. I told him ours was for sale."

"Sammie, you didn't!"

"Sure did. But when I saw him kissing you I figured there was no use selling to him. He'd have it anyway."

She felt her cheeks grow scarlet. "I wouldn't sell to him if he were the last man on earth. Now stop your jabbering and eat."

That night she started fitting a new curtain over the broad south window. Why she wanted to do it, when she was going to leave soon, she couldn't understand. It was like keeping those Texas cattle off range that soon wouldn't be hers.

The rattle of buggy wheels on the hard driveway brought her to the porch. She was surprised to see Thornton, the Hill City banker, alighting from his red-wheeled single-seater.

"Good evening, Miss Barden—Joyce, I should say." He flashed a friendly smile toward her and tied his horse to the post.

Joyce took the curtain pins from her lips. "Why, Mr. Thornton! What brings you out here this late in the day?"

He came up beside her, a tall, good-looking man in white shirt, black string tie and suit coat. He took off his dark, flat-crowned hat and dusted his trousers briefly, his eyes not leaving her face. "A little business and—ah—maybe a little social hello."

She felt the intentness of his dark eyes, and flushed slightly. The bank had been left him by his father, and she had always felt a bit at a loss with the handsome young businessman.

"Won't you come in?"

He did, producing some papers from his coat pocket. "I have a buyer for your ranch, but I will need your signature."

"A big, yellow-haired cowboy?" Sammie's voice came from the door, breathlessly. He'd seen the rig and had come running.

"No. A Mr. Schaus, who has been looking for an investment."

For some reason Joyce's heart had risen, then fallen; she couldn't tell why. "You run along, Sammie. Mr. Thornton and I have business to talk about."

"If Grant doesn't buy the Clover R like he said he would, I'm not staying. And I'm not going to Hill City and live like a sissy either. I'm going with the trail herd and become a trail driver like Grant."

"Grant? Who is this Grant?"

"He's a cowboy from Texas, and a good one. He's like my pa. He isn't afraid of anything. And don't let him catch you kissing my sister because he's sweet on her."

"Sammie! Get out!" When she came back from closing the door on Sammie, she tried to look composedly at Mr. Thornton, but she knew her face was pink. He saw it too. He moved toward her and took her hands.

"Joyce," he said. At the sudden intentness of his tone she widened her eyes, startled. His hands were drawing her toward him.

"Why Mr. Thornton—"

"Call me Walter. You're a pretty woman, Joyce, and I've been thinking a lot about you—too much, I'm afraid, unless you—"

HIS words stopped and his large smooth hands moved up her bare arms. He drew her swiftly closer. "Can't you see, my dear. You are a woman, a beautiful woman, and I—"

She felt his kiss then, a seeking, hungry kiss. She was too startled to resist. Could this be possible? Walter Thornton wanted her, wanted to marry her? She could be the wife of the banker of Hill City! She could have all the rich clothes, carriages and jewels she wanted. All she had to do was give in to this man. Men are such weak creatures, she thought. A cool woman can do anything with them. Should she?

But as he was kissing her lips she stood limply, thinking these strange thoughts. A tiny voice inside her asked, did she want him this way? Did she want him at all?

She heard Sammie coming onto the porch, and tried to push out of Walter's arms. "Don't—let me go—" The door opened, and it wasn't Sammie, but Grant Leggett. He was sweaty and dusty. And suddenly, judging by the brightness in his hazel eyes, he was also angry, very angry.

"So here's where you came, just as I figured. And not only robbing her, but kissing her!"

Thornton took his arms swiftly away from joyce and stepped back, but he wasn't fast enough. The Texan jumped across the room and hit him on the jaw, knocking him against the table.

The old fury came alive in Joyce. She sprang in front of Grant.

"You stop that, you—you Texan! If I want to kiss Walt Thornton, that's my business."

"Even if he's robbing you? I offered him twice the price he was going to get from that other gent for your ranch, but he turned me down. I figured they're in cahoots. If you want to go on kissing him when I get through with him, that's your business—but nobody's going to leave me sitting in a bank office while he sneaks out the back way to complete a deal I got my foot in. No, ma'am." He thrust her firmly to one side and went for Thornton.

Cornered, Thornton put up a fight. He was as tall as the Texan; he weighed more. But it was a banker against a range rider. After three futile flurries by Walt Thornton, Grant Leggett put him away under the kitchen sink with a walloping right to his jaw.

"There, Miss Joyce Barden, is your fine-feathered friend. Do what you want with him." He turned and stamped out of the room, his high heels sounding like hammers.

Joyce was so furious she almost choked. That man!

WALTER THORNTON groaned. His eyes were opening. She ran to the water pail. It was empty, and the kitchen pump was broken. She ran to the door. "Sammie! Sammie!" But all she could see was the tall back of Grant Leggett riding distantly over the prairie.

"I'm all right, Miss Barden," Thornton said behind her, getting to his feet and straightening his coat. "Who is that crazy fellow?"

But suddenly Joyce wasn't hearing. Her eyes were wildly searching for emptiness of the Clover R ranchyard. There wasn't much to hide in or behind, only the sod barn, the cow shed, the corrals, the windmill.

"Sammie! Sammie!" Then she saw the empty corral. The colt was gone, and the saddle from the top pole. Sammie had managed to get the saddle on his two-year-old and had taken off. But where?

Then she remembered his boyish threats. The tin bucket dropped from her hands and, for the second time that day, she ran out across the prairie toward the ford. Sammie, to join the trail herd, would have to cross the swollen ledge. And what chance would a boy on a half-broken colt have?

Grant Leggett was loping along and almost to the ford when he chanced to look back, for the first time since leaving the Clover R kitchen. The sight of the girl running toward him brought him to a halt with a shock. Then something in the girl's swift run, with her dresses gathered up about her knees, made him bring the dun sharply around. He put spurs to the horse.

"Sammie," she gasped. "He saddled the colt and went to your camp."

"He was going to cross the river on that skittish colt?" Grant Leggett swept the girl up before his saddle with one swoop of his right arm, and under a double load he set the dun toward the ford as fast as raking spurs could send it.

Even before they came to the ford they saw the black colt. He was far down the river, glistening wet, with head hanging, as if he'd just fought his way out of the maelstrom.

"There's his horse! Oh, God," she prayed. "Now if only Sammie has hung to the saddle or Black Star's tail—"

But she did not see the boy among the short willows and reeds along the rocky shore.

"There's plenty of chance that the boy fought out of it himself." Grant Leggett yanked the dun to a halt by the quivering colt, swung the girl off, and leaped to the ground, running toward the racing river that

frothed over the jagged rocks. Joyce, with sickness dragging through her heart, followed blindly.

Branches whipped her eyes, caught in her hair. Grant Leggett was racing ahead, down the river. His boots turned on rocks. He fell. He splashed through water and kept running.

Suddenly he stopped. He screamed something back, pointing out into the stream, but she couldn't hear. She looked but couldn't see anything. Leggett put his fingers to his lips, and she knew he was whistling. She couldn't hear that either, and she wondered why he was doing that, Then a thunder of hoofs went pounding past her, and the dun ran to the tall Texan. The dun's sharp ears had heard above the roar of the cataract.

Joyce tried to run faster, but her dress kept getting caught. She ripped it away from the bush. It tore in half. She scrambled onward. Leggett was grabbing his lariat from his saddle. She saw him tying one end to the largest willow on the bank. She fell, got up, ran toward him. And then she saw what he had spotted—and her heart froze with horror.

SAMMIE was out in mid-stream, flat on a tiny rock, clutching it, his face white, his blue eyes wide. He watched them, not daring to move.

"Save him—but you can't—oh, get him—" She cried a thousand things at once. Grant Leggett didn't say anything. He worked swiftly, knotting the lariat around his waist. Joyce wanted to close her eyes. He was going out there?

The Texan went into the river cautiously, up-stream. He had taken off his boots. He sought for footing on the rocks. He inched outward, a step at a time. The water came up on his legs, swirled around his knees. He tottered, almost fell, righted himself and Joyce, with knuckles pressed against her lips, breathed an agonized prayer.

She saw Sammie watching, not moving. The water washed over his yellow head repeatedly. The rock to which he clung seemed to move insecurely with this added weight on top of it. If one large wave hit Sammie, she knew, the rock would go rolling. She bit her knuckles. Grant Leggett was fifteen feet from the boy and still on his feet, but there was a strip of racing green water ten feet wide between. There were no rocks beneath that. That was the main channel. That was where her father had drowned.

And suddenly she couldn't breathe. Her throat ached. He had come to the strip of green water.

She saw him tense. He was some yards above Sammie. She saw him lean forward, then spring desperately outward, clawing for the rock.

The water closed over him. She saw his long body whirling. She saw him kicking, swimming. In a split second the green millrace had taken him. Joyce cried aloud. He was missing Sammie. And then her heart leaped. Sammie had let go the rock. He was reaching for the Texan. He trusted Grant Leggett.

Joyce, in that second of terrible fear, saw their fingers touch briefly. Then the waters closed over both of them.

"Dear God," she started to pray, and then, through her tear-drenched lashes, she saw that Grant Leggett had Sammie's fingers. And one of his hands, his left one, had the boy by the shoulder! The stream was whirling them around and around, downriver, the lariat slipping and splashing over the jagged rocks.

Suddenly Joyce was conscious of a threshing behind her. The willow to which the end of the lariat was tied was straining wildly. She saw roots tearing loose. In seconds the whole thing would go.

She looked around in desperation, then saw the dun there. She grasped the bridle and pulled the horse next to the straining rope by the willow. With the swift expediency of a range-born girl, she brought the stirrup up around the lariat and hooked the stirrup onto the saddle horn. At that instant the willow roots gave way.

The powerful dun lurched with the blow, but rigid training braced him hard, even if a huge willow branch was threshing at his right side and a screaming girl was in his saddle holding down that stirrup over the horn. He felt a tug at the reins. He began backing, slowly, fighting for footing on the coarse gravel.

He backed until a laughing, sobbing, crazy girl slipped out of the saddle and ran with sodden, ripped dress out into the shallow water to help two sopping figures to dry land. The dun blinked and watched and just stood still; he thought all humans were silly creatures, especially those flappy ones that had long hair and wore a lot of loose clothes around their legs.

THE buggy and Walt Thornton were gone. Joyce went to the stove and poked the fire. Not one of the three was much the worse for the incident. Joyce saw that her dress was torn and was conscious that half her legs were showing, but now somehow that didn't matter too much. Grant was sitting in a chair pouring water from his boots into the sink. His body looked awfully lean and hard, soaking wet like that.

Joyce turned from the fire and saw Sammie going out the door. "Got to brush down Black Star. Gosh, he can swim, Grant, almost good as you. If I'd hung onto him I'd have been all right."

Leggett gave him a smile and reached unconsciously toward his shirt pocket, then stopped the motion. She handed him a sack of tobacco from the kitchen shelf. "Here's where you left it yesterday. Remember?" She struck a match for him.

He was awfully quiet. She watched him, wide-eyed, a little uncertain.

Then he said, slowly, "I didn't forget that tobacco yesterday. I left it there purposely so as to get rid of Sammie for a while. You see, I was planning to ask you something. I thought it would take years for a girl to corral me. You did it in thirty seconds, out on the prairie the first time we met.

"And then, by jeepers, you wouldn't have me. I tried again, and still you wouldn't have me. I just dunno."

He wasn't looking at her, for some reason. He was looking steadfastly out the window at the crimson sunset. "Now, I reckon I'm afraid to try a third time."

She dropped the burned-out match into the stove and replaced the stove lid. Then she went to him and sat down on his wet lap, her torn dress draping his boots. It fell apart at her knees, but she didn't try to cover them.

She said softly, "For a brave man, Grant, I'm surprised at you. Why don't you try a third time? I don't think Sammie will be in for a long while."

Coming up in the next issue

RANGE OF FEAR

Ed Turcott was a big man . . . and he'd get away with murder too, if the one witness could be kept quiet

A Magazine-Length Novel

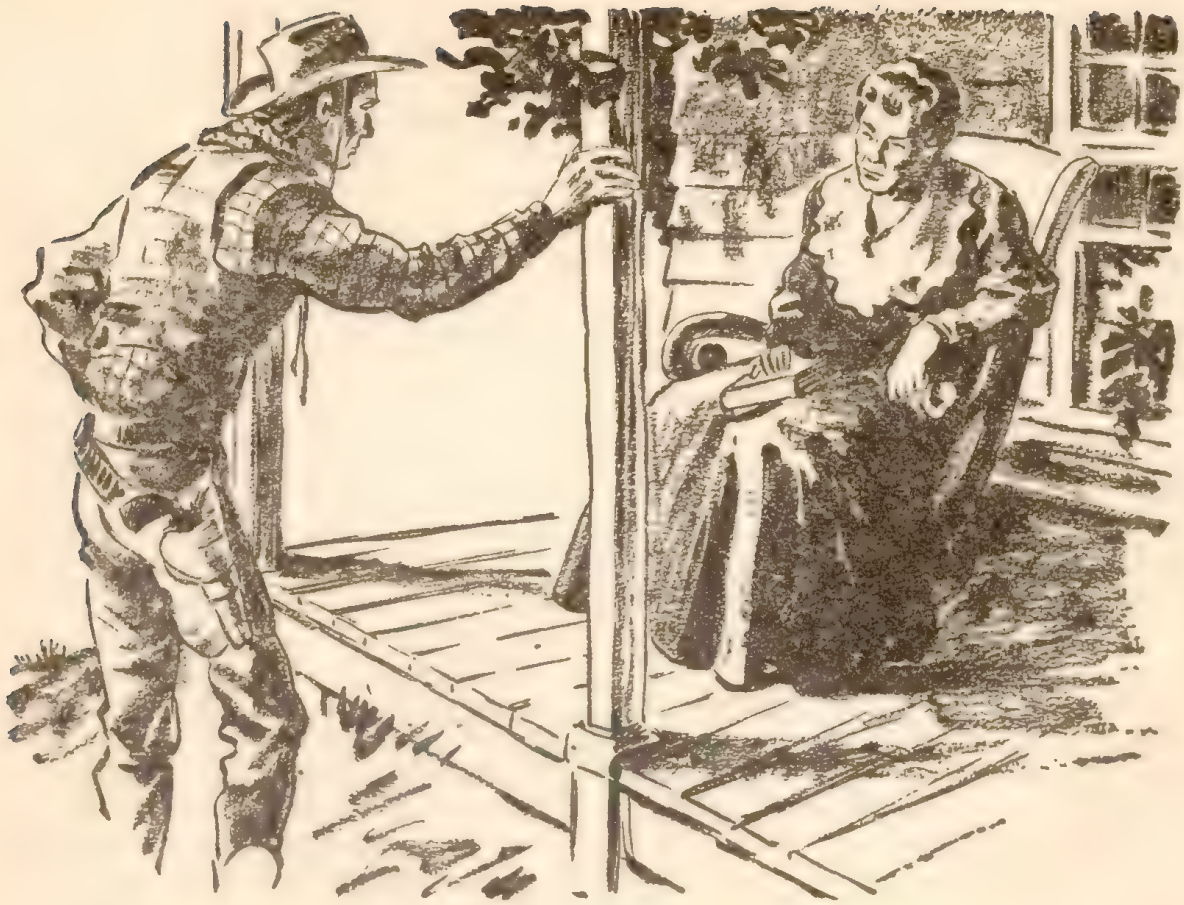
By J. L. BOUMA

THE FIGHTING TEXAN

Jim Quartermain was willing to take on the Running W's quarrel . . . for the woman he couldn't stop loving

Beginning an Exciting Serial

By WILL COOK



The Brains of the Family

By Donald Bayne Hobart

MA WAKELY was sitting on the porch of the ranchhouse when she saw the rider loom out of the heat haze in the distance. First she didn't pay attention. Folks had a habit of dropping in when they came by this way—cowboys from the neighboring outfits hunting for strays, men from town to see Seth on law business, and now and then just a drifter riding the grubline.

Bay horse with three white stockings, thought Ma Wakely. At sixty-five there was nothing wrong with her eyesight. Big man in the saddle. Don't believe I've ever seen him or the horse before.

The rider was closer now, heading straight for the ranch yard. Ma Wakely felt a strange uneasiness stealing over her. There was something about the oncoming horseman she didn't like. It wasn't natural for her to feel that way. Seth had told her many times just teasing, that she wasn't a filly who spooked easy.

Of course she'd pretend to get mad at Seth for comparing her to a horse, but when a man

---

SETH WAKELY was a smart sheriff . . . but Ma Wakely knew a few tricks too

said that about you after you'd been married to him for twenty years it gave you a mighty nice feeling.

Ma Wakely found herself wishing Seth were here now. Folks had said, ten years ago when he first took office, that they figured Seth Wakely was just about the best sheriff Mesquite County had ever had. They were still saying it. Ma agreed, though there were times—like this morning—when she wished he were still just a cowman running his ranch, instead of a law officer out hunting a man.

The stranger rode into the yard and drew rein in front of the porch. Ma Wakely saw that both the bay and the big man looked tuckered out, as if they'd done a heap of traveling.

"Morning, Ma'am," the stranger said, in a voice that grated like a wagon wheel needing axle grease. "Nice day. My name's Joe Norton."

"Howdy, Mr. Norton," Ma Wakely said. "Light and rest."

"Thanks, I'll do that."

Norton dismounted stiffly , dropped the reins, and left the bay standing ground-hitched. Ma Wakely frowned as she rose from her chair and stood watching. It was cool in the shade around at the side of the house, and from where this Joe Norton stood he could see the watering trough. If he cared about his horse he wouldn't leave the tired bay just standing there in the hot sun.

Ma Wakely usually spoke her mind when she felt like it. "Take that horse around in the shade," she snapped, "and give him a drink as soon as he cools off a little."

Norton looked at the little woman in the faded cotton dress as if he were really seeing her for the first time. Then he grinned.

"You're right, Ma'am," he said. "Should have thought of that myself."

"I'll be out in the kitchen fixing you some vittles," said Ma Wakely. Her dark eyes looked Norton over from head to foot. "Reckon you'd like to wash up before you eat."

SHE went into the house and back to the kitchen. All through the years she'd always kept a pot of coffee and maybe a stew that didn't need much warming on the back of the stove, in case hungry folks stopped by. It was the neighborly thing to do.

The coffee was boiling and the stew was warmed up when Joe Norton stepped in through the kitchen doorway. He had washed off some of the dust, but Ma Wakely thought a shave and haircut would still improve him considerably. His eyes were hard, and he kept staring at her with the watchful, wary look of the hunted.

"Sit at the table," she said, glancing at the heavy gold ring with the big diamond that Norton wore on the little finger of his right hand. "I'll have your meal ready in a jiffy."

"Thanks." Norton dropped his hat on the floor beside him as he seated himself at the kitchen table. "You live all alone here, Ma'am?"

"No," Ma Wakely said, as she poured the coffee into a cup. "My husband is away now." Her gaze was worried as she looked again at the ring on the big man's hand. That diamond sparkled like it had always done. "But Seth will be back soon, I hope." Ma Wakely's voice was tired. "The hands are out on the range hunting strays for the fall gather."

"I'm a stranger in this region," Norton said, pouring sugar into his coffee and stirring it around with a spoon in his left hand. "Just passing through. Figure on getting a job further west." He watched the doors and windows.

"I don't think you will," Ma Wakely said.

"Why not?" Norton asked as he drank some of his coffee, then started in on the stew and bread and other fixings.

"Too late in the year for much hiring," said Ma Wakely, sinking into a chair at the other end of the table. "Unless some outfit needs an extra hand for the fall roundup. You ride through from the north?"

"I did," said Norton. "Why?"

"If you came that way I thought you might have heard about the trouble at the Walking R. Lem Rockland was held up and robbed of the payroll money he was bringing from town.

"I didn't stop by the Walking R," Norton said. "And I never heard of Lem Rockland."

"Fine man," said Ma Wakely. "He and my husband have been friends for years."

"Your husband is the sheriff, Seth Wakely," Norton said. "I figured so when you mentioned his first name."

"That matter to you?" Ma Wakely asked.

"It does," said Norton. "There are times a man gets tired of running."

"*Men* don't run." There was biting scorn in Ma Wakely's voice. "Only wolves and coyotes light out because they're scared."

Norton's laugh was mean. "You figure I'm scared of your husband?"

"Better men than you have been," said Ma.

"He'll be coming back soon," Norton said, as he finished off the stew. "I left a plain trail leading this way—if he can read sign."

"I never thought him dumb." Ma Wakely rose. The sound of the coffee still boiling on the stove was a soothing sound. "And when he gets here?"

"I'll kill him," said Norton quietly.

MA WAKELY snorted. "I wouldn't like to be a widow—too used to having a man around the house. Have some more coffee?"

"Don't mind if I do." Norton gazed at her in amazement. "You sure take it calm."

"Seth's been a sheriff for ten years," said Ma Wakely, picking up the coffee pot. "Folks have threatened to kill him before, but he isn't dead yet."

She glanced at the open door of the deep closet that Seth had built for her at one side of the kitchen. He had done a fine job of it. The whole thing was made of brick.

"Here's your coffee," Ma Wakely said. "Hope it's hot enough for a killer."

She started to pour the coffee into the empty cup on the table, and then suddenly turned the pot so the hot liquid came pouring down on Norton's right hand and arm He leaped to his feet with a howl of pain.

"Back up, and keep on backing, or I'll let you have the rest of it square in the face," said Ma Wakely. "I'm not fooling."

Norton took one good look at her and then started backing across the kitchen.

"You've gone plumb loco," he growled.

"Keep moving," said Ma Wakely.

He stepped back through the open doorway of the deep closet, as she raised the coffee pot as if about to throw it at him. Automatically he grabbed the closet door and drew it shut with his left hand, his only thought to protect himself from this mad woman.

Ma Wakely leaped to the door and, with her free hand, snapped the padlock into place.

As she put the coffee pot back on the stove, Ma Wakely heard the stranger pounding on the other side of the heavy door. He was cursing, too, and he sounded furious.

She didn't care though. He had some nerve, figuring on making her a widow. Besides, she'd hated him ever since she had recognized the diamond ring he was wearing.

Then Seth stepped quietly into the kitchen through the back door, gun ready.

"He left a plain trail, and the bay he was riding is outside. Where is he, Ma?"

"I got him locked up in the cool closet," said Ma Wakely. "But he still has his gun."

"You locked him in the cool closet?" Seth stared in amazement. "You mean that all by yourself you captured the man who killed and robbed Lem Rockford?"

"That's right," said Ma Wakely. "He said his name was Norton, and he's wearing Lem's diamond ring. Told me he was going to kill you soon as you got here, Seth."

"And still you got him," said the sheriff dazedly. "How?"

"Reckon you might say I gave him too much coffee," said Ma Wakely.

Seth decided to leave the prisoner where he was until evening. Maybe by that time Norton wouldn't be fool enough to try to shoot his way out of trouble—specially when he learned that the sheriff and four cowboys were all covering him with their guns.

Ma Wakely went to the closet door and called to tell Norton that there was baking soda he could put it on his burned hand.

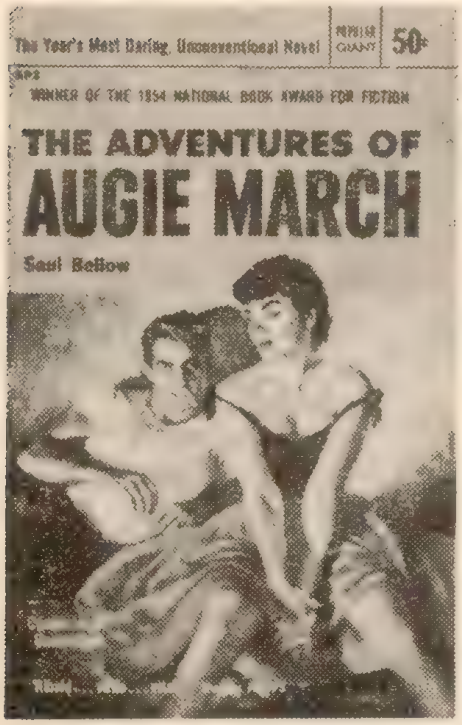
"Don't it worry you sometimes, Ma?" Seth asked, teasingly. "Having all the brains in this family, I mean."

"You hush!" said Ma Wakely.

All the same, when Seth said things like that it made her feel right young and skittish, like—well, like a two-year-old filly.

NOW AVAILABLE FOR THE FIRST TIME IN POCKET-SIZE POPULAR LIBRARY EDITION

Winner of the 1954 National Book Award!
A Book-of-the-Month Club Alternate Selection!
Hailed as "the most distinguished fiction of the year"



"THE ADVENTURES OF AUGIE MARCH"

BY SAUL BELLOW

NATIONAL BOOK AWARD

WINNER OF THE NATIONAL BOOK AWARD

A POPULAR LIBRARY BESTSELLER

BUY IT WHEREVER POCKET-SIZE BOOKS ARE SOLD!

a true story

Pony Express, Junior Grade

DISTANCE, climate, and terrain—to say nothing of half-a-dozen tribes of scalp-hungry Indians along the way—made mail deliveries to Montana Territory irritatingly slow. Often a letter took from three to six months to travel up by stagecoach just from Salt Lake City, to say nothing of the weeks or months it had taken to get that far.

Montanans might consider themselves virtually an independent nation, list news from the east under "Foreign Items" in their newspapers, and refer to going back east as "going back to the States" or "setting sail for America" but they wanted their mail just as fast as anyone else.

Even if housed in a sod-roofed log cabin fifty miles from the nearest neighbor, the men who followed the gold stampede to the Territory insisted on having the latest luxuries available in other parts of the West—and, with the average "take" from a fairly good placer claim yielding at least $200 worth

By J. J. Kerttula and D. L. McDonald

of gold dust per day, they had the wherewithal to pay for their whims.

When giving a dinner, for example, no prosperous Montana miner thought anything of sending down to Salt Lake City for "a turkey and all the trimmings," although after it had come the five hundred miles by stagecoach the price per pound was likely to be more than a good-sized bird costs nowadays. Unfortunately, such delicacies were perishable and no amount of gold dust could insure the prospective host against the perils of long delays—of hot weather, floods, or Indian raids.

So, when someone suggested that Montana inaugurate her own private Pony Express, patterned upon the romantic and picturesque Pony, the idea was hailed with enthusiasm by the citizens of the Territory. More important, a group of prosperous miners gave it lavish financial backing.

The recent failure of the parent Pony—The Pony Overland Express—did not deter them. After all, why should it? Though in its brief nineteen months of life the Pony Express made no more than one-hundred-and-fifty round trips and carried in all less mail than customarily went each week by the stagecoaches of the Overland, to the men of Montana, as to later generations, the Pony epitomized the romance and the glamour of the West.

What matter that it cost more than a million dollars and ruined the pioneer staging firm of Russell, Majors and Waddell? What matter that it bankrupted Alexander Majors, the West's most picturesque financier? It did carry the mail more than two thousand miles in a matter of ten days, didn't it? And that was a feat not equalled since the couriers of Kubla Khan streaked across the steppes of Outer Mongolia.

There was plenty of gold to be had for the digging in Angel Gulch and the other gold strikes of the Territory. Why shouldn't Montanans have their own Pony?

NONETHELESS, the Pony Junior ran into all the organizational difficulties of the original one, and a few extras of purely local origin. So it was not until 1867, after more than a year of cussin' and discussin', that it finally went into operation between Helena, Montana, and St. Paul—a distance of well over a thousand miles by the route then traveled.

No records now remain to show if the Pony Junior ever equalled the time of the parent organization. Montana of that day seems to have been too busy doing other things to keep accurate records anyhow, and in the case of their own version of the Pony Express they seem to be agreed that the less said the better. Actually, it made little difference. However swiftly its ponies ran, the Pony Junior did little to speed up Montana's mail.

One difficulty lay in the fact that, with the exception of the Bozeman Pass, most of the route was over open prairie where war parties of Sioux, Nez Perces, and the rest could spot an oncoming Pony rider a long way off. Chasing the mailman soon became the favorite sport of young bucks out to prove themselves warriors by lifting a paleface scalp.

In many respects such as station arrangement, length of rides, and so forth, the Pony Junior was closely patterned after the Overland Mail. But it did not have hard-driving men like Captain Slade of the Overland to whip it into shape. Discipline was lax or nonexistent, and the riders showed little or no loyalty toward the organization. Unlike the riders of the Pony Express, most of whom did not even carry guns, and the Pony Junior's horsemen insisted on packing their rifles even if it meant cutting down on the amount of mail they could carry.

When chased they didn't "ride for it" as did the boys of the Pony Express, but were more inclined to duck behind a cottonwood to ambush the pursuit. And when they really had to ride or lose their scalps, they were likely to throw away the mail sacks first of all, to lighten their pony's load. A lot of Montana's mail was lost that way.

Contrary to rules, the riders of the Pony Junior carried a good many things besides the mail. Starting from St. Paul, a rider would tuck a few newspapers in his saddlebags and leave them at various way stations. After the boys there had spelled them out, the news-

papers would drift along westward in some other rider's load. Thus a steady stream of news followed in the wake of the Pony Junior.

Unfortunately, some of the riders' other errands cut still further into the mail-carrying capacity of the line, and without even the incidental benefit dispensing news. By the time all the riders had gotten around to picking up the various small items requested by friends along the route, their saddle bags often had little room left for the mail. In fact, it has been said that, rather than a mail route, the Pony Junior was mostly just an accommodation fast freight line.

In addition to the way these extra-curricular activities cut down on the line's letter-carrying capacity, if the weather were bad—as it was likely to be some six months out of the year—most riders would further lighten the load by leaving part of the mail at some way station to be picked up some other day—if they got around to it. What did it matter, they argued when the matter was brought officially to their attention, if some prospector didn't find out till months later that his wife "back in the States" had tired of waiting for him to make his stake and had run off with someone else? He was better off not knowing, wasn't he?

It took but a single year to prove to its backers that the Pony Junior would equal its illustrious parent in one way only—the speed with which it could lose money. So in the summer of 1868 its manager, Al Bradbury, traveled westward from station to station from St. Paul to Helena, "rolling up the line."

Riders and their swift ponies vanished into the obscurity of the unfenced prairies. The station buildings were left to crumble into decay.

The backers of the Pony Junior shrugged their shoulders and took their loss. Another of the West's expensive attempts to link itself more closely with the rest of the nation had failed.

But now it no longer mattered, for westward across the prairies an Iron Horse was pushing its way at a speed horseflesh could not equal. The era of the Pony Mail had passed.

The failure of the Pony, Junior Grade, was but another facet of the passing of this era.

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. In the word *hombre* the "h" is silent, the "*bre*" is pronounced "bray." Should the "om" sound like the "om" in bomb, the "ome" in home, or the "um" in bum?

2. The thorn-brush cow country often called The Big Thicket is located in what state?

3. Are the "alligators" of southwestern New Mexico wild cattle, lizards or a species of juniper trees?

4. Badger Clark's poem "High-Chin Bob" begins: "Way up high in the Mokiones, among the mountain tops, a lion cleaned a yearling's bones and licked his thankful chops." The Mogollon Mountains, sometimes called Mokiones, are in what state?

5. Here are the names of three western outlaws and of the three officers who killed them. Pair them up, killer with the killed: Billy Grounds, Pat Garrett, Billy the Kid, Jeff Milton, Three-Fingered Jack Patterson, Billy Breakenridge.

6. Are male and female wapiti (commonly called elk) referred to as buck or doe or bull and cow?

7. What is meant by the expression "five beans in the wheel?"

8. Gen. Lew Wallace wrote part of his famous novel, *Ben Hur*, while governor of what Territory?

9. Gene Rambo of Shandon, Calif., held what title in the International Rodeo Association three years in succession (1948, '49 and '50)?

10. Complete the two-word names of these Rocky Mountain flowers: tiger————, elephant————, lady————, mariposa (or sego)————.

——*Rattlesnake Robert*

You will find the answers to these questions on page 113. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

Mandy stared at the column of smoke rising in the still air

SHORT GRASS

By Dorothy Roseborough

MANDY SLATER FOLLOWED her heart West . . . over a trail of danger

MANDY SLATER climbed to the rise above the valley where, far below, the white topped wagons took the road out of High Falls and headed toward the west. She stood dry-eyed, watching her friends leave. The last of them pulled out today, and in the train was the man she had hoped to marry.

Two weeks earlier Hal Wyn had asked her to go with him to the gold fields as his bride.

"I can't," Mandy said. "You know I can't leave my mother."

"We could get someone to take care of her. How about young Lizzy Wells? She hasn't any family. She'd be lucky to work just for a home."

"You don't understand." Mandy felt the unhappy tightening in her throat that so often came when she tried to explain things to Hal. "Mother's going to die. How can I leave her?"

"She's been going to die for a year now." Hal's voice was harsh with impatience. "You've slaved for her ever since you were big enough to haul a bucket. Who'd

blame you for marrying and going West with me? No one could say you haven't been the best daughter in the world."

"It's been my duty. I love her."

"Don't you owe some duty to your husband?" The young man's face flushed with anger. "Don't you love me too? You promised to marry me, didn't you?"

"We aren't married yet, Hal. And I can't leave till Mother's well or—" Then she cried passionately, "But I won't talk of her dying. It's horrible to reckon on someone's death because I want to marry."

He stared at her, frowning. "Well, Mandy, take your choice. Come with me or stay here, as you like. But I'm going to California, and a man in a new country needs a wife." He put his arm round her waist and pulled her close, rubbing his rough cheek against hers in the old loving way that seemed to have been forgotten in the last few weeks. "You love me," he murmured. "You've always been my girl, remember?"

BECAUSE she knew she must strengthen herself against him, Mandy turned away her head, avoiding his urgent lips. She said, half ashamed of the asking, "If only you'd be willing to wait for me, Hal, just for a while."

"And have the best claims taken? Everything good staked out and us come tagging along? No, there'll be no more waiting for me." He released her, stepping back. He said, a cruel relish in his voice, "'Tisn't as if Mrs. Slater were your own mother. She took you as an orphan, we all know that. Let her get another girl to slave for her. She won't care."

Mandy's hand flashed up and slapped his cheek. "Go away," she cried out. "Go to California and don't come back. I never want to see you again."

She slammed shut the gate and ran up the brick path to the cottage. Tears blinded her eyes, but she dashed them away impatiently. She stopped at the door, hoping against hope that Hal would follow. But he was gone, walking at a furious pace down the street. As she watched, he turned in at the gate of Flora Peyton's front yard. Mandy went into the house then and looked no longer.

Mrs. Slater called from the room off the kitchen, "Isn't Hal coming in?"

"No, not tonight," Mandy answered quietly. Not again, not ever again, she thought. I've lost him. . . .

Early today the wagons lined up in the courthouse square. Mandy had not slept all night. At dawn she heard the shouts of men working with unruly mules or stubborn bawling oxen, and listened to the excited voices of women crying good-byes to those they were leaving behind. But she waited until the town square was empty before she came out to climb the rise above the valley.

No captain had been chosen as yet, but Hal Wyn's wagon was in the lead, with its three span of magnificent black-and-white oxen, the pride of Hal and his cousin Jasper. Four other wagons followed slowly, and shouting boys herded loose cattle and horses in the rear of the train.

It was a still, cold morning, the end of winter and scarcely yet the beginning of spring, and the sound of singing and shouting and the chime of ox-bow bells rose clear and high in the thin chilly air. Mandy watched with a desperate intensity, straining her eyes to catch the last glimpse of Hal's stocky figure as he trudged alongside his lead oxen, but she had a feeling that she would never see him again.

"Unless—" she said aloud, and was startled to hear the word repeated.

"Unless what?" Jasper Wyn said. "Finish it, Mandy."

STARTLED, she stepped back almost into Jasper's arms. Hal's cousin had been nicknamed "The Gypsy." Where Hal was stocky and blond, with a bright fair skin that showed the color of his quick tempers, Jasper was tall and lithe with a smooth dark face and black eyes that kept their own secrets. He drawled when he spoke, and moved with a certain indolent grace.

Gossip had it that he was a lazy man, and yet Mandy knew that, when he wished, Jasper worked with extraordinary speed.

She had long sensed a feeling of jealousy between the cousins. "Jasper can always take off and go hunting," Hal used to grumble, "and I can never find the time."

Mandy thought that Jasper was going hunting now. But he laid his long rifle against a tree trunk and turned to her, smiling his lazy smile. "Unless what, Mandy?"

"I mean," she stammered, "We'll not likely see them again unless we move West too. Why didn't you go, Jasper? Most all the men couldn't wait to leave High Falls."

Jasper looked at Mandy and laughed. "There are still some pretty girls left. Looks like things will work out real nice for the men who stayed home. The wagons were scarcely out of the square before my fiddle and I had two bids for Sunday dinner."

Mandy looked idly at the valley road; the black-and-white oxen were out of sight. "Are there really two pretty girls left in town?"

"There are three. The third one hasn't asked me to her house yet. But I can wait."

The dark man picked up his rifle and went away into the trees, disappearing as silently as an Indian, and even, Mandy thought, looking very much like one. Then she forgot him as she watched the last wagon turn into the far deep cut of the valley road. After a while she too went away.

That night the little town seemed fallen into a pit of silence, and only a few of the houses had lights. Mandy was sitting on the steps in the dark when Jasper dropped down at her side in his quiet way.

"Feels strange, doesn't it?" he said. "The place might be dead or dying." He laid down a couple of rabbits. "Here's something for your mother's dinner tomorrow. How is she, Mandy?"

"Honest, Jasper, I don't know. She's got more fever, I reckon, because she's bound and determined to go to California like the others. Says nothing's going to stop her. Come in and talk to her; she'll like seeing you."

Mandy led the way into the house. The tall man bent his head to enter the low closed-up room off the kitchen. Mrs. Slater raised herself on the pillows. She was very thin, with angry patches of color on her cheekbones.

She began talking in a hurried feverish voice. "I may have lung fever," she said, as if continuing an argument. "I'm not saying it isn't so. But here's your cousin Hal gone away with that flighty piece, Flora Peyton, and no doubt she'll marry him before he know's what's happening to him. And Mandy will be left alone when I die."

"Now, Mother—" Mandy began.

But Mrs. Slater went on, "I know very well Mandy's only waiting for that to happen before she finds some way to go after Hal. And that's only right, because they were ready to get married. Dear knows I don't want to be the one to stop her—" She began to cry and then to cough with a painful strangling noise, while Mandy held the wasted body in her arms, trying to soothe her.

"I don't see that it's any worse to die in a wagon than to die in this stuffy room," Mrs. Slater finished, gasping. "We could get a driver to take care of us for the cost of the passage and a few dollars over when we get to California."

MANDY looked helplessly at the young man. "I don't know, Jasper, I just don't know what to do. Maybe I could find work out there. I'm a real good cook. And she's so unhappy. No one can get well if they're miserable."

"No one can get well unless they can breathe." Jasper strode to the window and jerked it open. "These fools of doctors! Even Indians know enough to help lung fever; I've seen them do it. You keep your mother warm, Mandy, but out of doors if possible."

"You mean living in a wagon won't hurt?"

"It might help." Jasper tucked the covers over the sick woman's shoulders with a gentle hand.

"But who could we hire to drive us,

a girl and a sick woman? I don't know anyone."

"You know me," Jasper said. "I'll do it. Think it over, Mandy. Goodnight, Mrs. Slater."

Perhaps Mandy was only waiting for assurance from someone—anyone—that the idea was feasible, for in less than two week's time, with Jasper's efficient help, they were ready to go. They took only the absolute necessities for the journey. At Independence, Jasper said, they would know what to add to their supplies, and right now the invalid's comfort was of the greatest importance.

Unlike most of the travelers, they left behind the heavy household goods, excepting only Mrs. Slater's best bedframe and favorite rocking chair. But Jasper insisted on carrying as much feed as they could, for they had decided on six fast mules instead of oxen, three saddle horses, a crate full of Manda's laying hens, and a couple of roosters.

They reached Independence in the early spring, when the country was just beginning to show green with the first grass, except where wagon tracks had churned the still-soggy ground into yellow mud. Jasper made camp well away from the town and the noisy crowded grounds, which swarmed with travelers, quarreling, drinking, and, too often, fighting, as they jockeyed for position.

"Your mother will be more comfortable a little way out," he explained. "She'd better rest while she can. I'll ride in and see about the supplies we'll need." He carefully looked away from Mandy as he said, "Hal will still be here. His company would have to wait till forage is better before they can move on. Maybe I can find him and bring him back to eat supper with us."

He turned his horse toward town. Mrs. Slater, lying on the bed which he had placed so that she could see out of the wagon, waved to him as he rode by, and he smiled, gallantly sweeping off his broad-brimmed hat.

"Makes a body feel better just to see Jasper grin," the old lady said, chuckling. "He's always so cheerful, I declare, sometimes I wonder if the man has good sense."

Mandy laughed. "He's not much like his cousin Hal. He works so quick and smooth, as if it weren't any trouble at all, but he gets an awful lot done."

SHE sighed, thinking of Hal, wondering if Jasper would find him, and longing for the feel of his cheek against hers. As she looked back now, even his anger and impatience were signs of his love for her. She hurried to busy herself at the camp fire. Hal had always liked her cooking. There hadn't been a girl in High Falls who could beat her at that.

But Jasper was alone when he pulled up his big black saddle horse near the wagon. Angry and frowning, he stepped down from the saddle.

"Hal's company got away a week ago. I don't like it, Mandy. He's risking the lives of everyone in the train just for the gamble of being a few days ahead. Hal knows better than that."

"But can it make much difference, just a few days?"

Jasper said curtly, "His oxen will be in bad shape. He depends on grass for forage. They'll starve if the grass isn't any higher than it is here."

"But there's plenty coming up," Mandy protested.

Jasper shook his head. "They've been gone for a week already. Oxen can't crop short grass the way a horse can."

"Is that why you wanted only horses and mules?"

"One reason. Another is they're twice as fast and I like 'em better." Jasper's mouth twisted in a wry grin. "Only trouble is, Indians like 'em better too."

Mandy said nervously, "Can't we do something to help?"

"Don't see how."

Mandy looked at the handsome black horse Jasper had been riding. "You could ride on ahead alone maybe, and bring him back."

He stared at her, a strange hard expression in his black eyes. "You want him to come back and let the others take their

chances? Do you think Hal Wyn would do that?"

Mandy stood silent. She felt angry and confused, knowing that if she were to tell the truth, she would have to answer "yes" to Jasper's question. Hal was willing to take chances, but he gave up too easily—just as he let his violent temper flare too easily. But she couldn't say that to his cousin.

She murmured, "No, Hal wouldn't leave them. He'd stay with the wagons." And she watched Jasper relax his tension.

He said, "We'll pull out as soon as we can. Maybe we can overtake them. But it's a long chance, with a week at least before we can get the supplies we need. One good thing, the rest will be fine for your mother. She looks better, doesn't she?"

"Her color's awfully high," Mandy said anxiously.

"Sure her color's high, but it doesn't look like fever to me. It's good fresh air that's done it, just like it has with you."

He touched her cheek with a gentle finger. Mandy's heart gave a startled jump; she stepped back, a wave of loneliness sweeping over her. Hal had not been gentle with her; his love was violent and possessive, something that left her with a shattering emotion storming through her.

Tenderness she had never known from a man; this was something sweet and different, and it touched her with a deep pleasure. Pretending it was time to tend to her mother, she climbed into the wagon and left Jasper alone by the campfire.

AS IT turned out, their journey was delayed by more than a week. A late spring snow came storming from the north. Many campers scattered before the first warning of the driving icy wind, crowding to the meager shelter of the town, where they were far from welcome. The price of food skyrocketed, and wood for the small stoves became scarce. Mandy was torn between not wanting to dip into their small reserve of money, and having to buy food at the astronomical prices demanded by the Independence townspeople.

"What shall we do?" she asked, worried. "If the weather doesn't break soon we'll be mighty short."

Jasper laughed. "There's nothing to worry about. We'll stay where we are and eat beans. Got plenty of those."

"Mother has to have something better than beans."

"No, I don't," Mrs. Slater denied with spirit. "I can eat the same things you do. I'm not asking any favors. Besides," she added, "for the first time in weeks I'm hungry. And I could drink a gallon of coffee right now."

Jasper shouted with laughter. "We'll have you out of that bed and riding horseback soon."

"Nothing I'd like better," Mrs. Slater retorted.

Mandy looked at her in amazement, and Jasper grinned. "Watch out! She'll be wagon boss if we let her."

For the moment Mandy forgot the storm and the uncertainties which seemed to spring up anew with every day. Whether it was the change of scene that had helped her mother, or merely getting away from a closed-up overheated room, she did not know, but there was no doubt that the old lady was improved in health. She herself had seldom felt so overflowing with energy. The animals were rested and well-fed; when the storm died down their wagon was one of the first to cross the red bridge leading to the fur traders' turn-off on the way to California.

The grass was showing well by then, but those who had rushed to take the trail when it was first greening gained nothing by their greed. A few families were camped by the trail, waiting for the oxen to regain their strength after a period of near-starvation.

It was near a scanty pasturage that Mandy noticed two black-and-white oxen lying in the mud. She pulled the mules to a halt.

"Jasper!" she called, and then, as he galloped alongside, "Aren't those Wyn oxen? But where's the wagon? Where's Hal?"

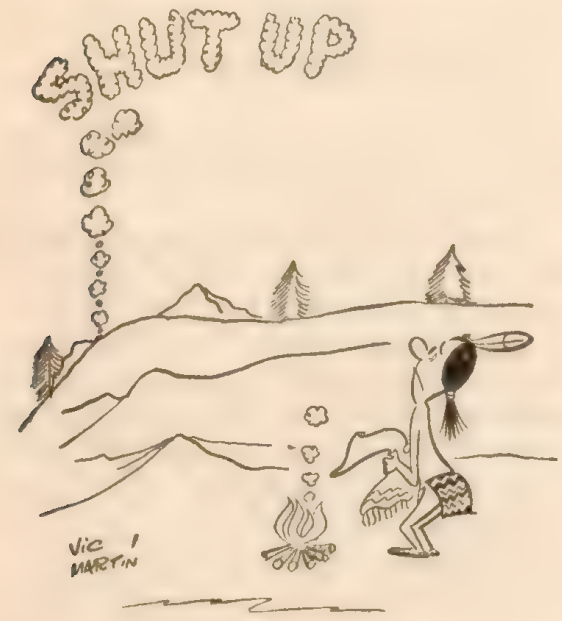
She pointed, and heard Jasper smother an exclamation. He said, "Those are ours.

sure enough. Go on, Mandy, keep on the trail. I'll ride over and take a look."

She drove on reluctantly. Glancing back before a swell in the prairie hid the place where she had glimpsed the cattle, she saw Jasper's horse sliding away from the motionless oxen. She knew then that they were dead, and felt a sudden sickening fear, but of what she scarcely knew. It was as if she had a sure foreknowledge of disaster.

When Jasper caught up with the wagon he asked, "Is your mother resting?"

She nodded, and he said, with a heavy



reluctance, "I didn't want her to be frightened. There's been trouble. Looks like some kind of a fight."

The front canvas of the wagon was closed. Mandy turned, lifted the flap, and glanced inside. Then she droped it back in place. "Mother's asleep." Then with a tight self-control, she looked at Jasper. "You mean Indians?"

He shook his head. "No sign of that. Worse, as I see it. Hal's oxen were shot. Been dead some days. By the tracks, the company's been fighting among themselves —maybe over grass."

Mandy said, bewildered, "But that's foolish, fighting over grass!"

"Good well-fed stock makes the difference between living and dying on the trail. Those cattle were starving, their bones were plain sticking out. Hal started too early. Even now the grass is mighty short for oxen to pasture."

HE RODE alongside, suddenly silent, and Mandy secretly watched the dark frowning gypsy face. She could guess the run of his thoughts. Jasper was part owner of the six finely-matched animals, and this touched him as closely as it would his cousin.

She tried to console him by saying, "It's a shame about the oxen. But there's still two span left. Maybe they'll get through all right." He made no sign of hearing, and rode on, lost in the blackness of anger.

It was almost noon when, perched high on the driver's seat, Mandy caught a glimpse of something moving in the brush.

"Jasper," she called, "see ahead, over to the right! There's two more of the oxen down. And they're not dead. They're trying to get up."

He was there on the run, and was back in an instant.

"Drive up closer, Mandy. I think we can save them. I'll get a fire going, and we'll need hot water. You bring out a couple of buckets. Maybe we can feed them some mash. Once on their feet they'll be all right."

Instead of going on that noon, they moved the wagon off the trail and camped near the two oxen. Mandy and Jasper swabbed the slime and caked dirt from the animals' muzzles, then hand-fed with a warm mash of bran middlings. The great stolid creatures improved in an almost miraculous manner, although it was not until the following day that they were able to struggle to their feet.

Mrs. Slater climbed out of the wagon and joined in caring for the animals; she took so much pride in being able to help that, against her better judgment, Mandy resigned herself to letting the older woman have her way.

"Just promise you'll lie down when you're tired," she said, and Mrs. Slater

retorted that she felt fine, and didn't intend to be put to bed like a baby.

"It's being treated like you're on your deathbed makes a body sick," she said. "Jasper's been right all along. I never want to see another closed window."

They stayed three days near a hidden spring in the brush, and broke camp early on the fourth morning. After they had finished their flapjacks and coffee in the gray dawn, Jasper smothered the fire with dirt and doused it with water.

"Hal's train will have slowed up to let their stock get back some strength, now the pasturage is better. You'll be seeing him soon," he said, his dark eyes giving her a quick sidelong look. "And that's what you and your mother wanted all the time, isn't it?"

The question hurt. He had no business asking that, Mandy thought. But she could not help feeling a sudden increased speed of the heartbeat which had been too quiet since Hal went away. In spite of his impatience and temper, and the untamed roughness of his love, the emotional response he aroused within her had been a sweet if terrifying experience.

For an instant she felt again the heaviness of his arms around her shoulders and remembered the kisses, violent and demanding, that made her respond, womanlike, to a masterful man. And then she caught Jasper staring at her, his black eyes narrowed and intent.

She said sharply, "Why should I want to see Hal? He's nothing to me."

"There was never a woman yet who said that and meant it."

He laughed, and she heard a mocking note in his laughter. He went on, "Well, *I* want to see him. I've wanted to take a poke at Hal many a time. Never quite got round to it because I haven't cared enough one way or the other. The next time we tangle I'm going to care enough to do just that. If I can," he added, with a wry grin. "Hal's hard to lick. It may take some doing."

Mandy said, "Why do you want to fight him more now than you did at High Falls?"

"Two dead oxen, for one thing. And there's another that I'll tell you about some day." He got up, yawning and stretching. "Well, I'll hitch up the mules. It'll be a slow haul today. Oxen are fidgety creatures to handle."

IT WASN'T long before Mandy decided he was right, and thought it no wonder that he liked the lively mules better, mean as they could be occasionally. After their former rapid progress the oxens' best pace was aggravatingly slow. The next few days were an eternity to her, although Jasper was convinced that they would soon catch up with Hal's company.

"Don't you be impatient," he said. "They're bound to have taken time to rest the stock and let 'em pasture any place where the grass is high enough. We'll find 'em soon enough."

She knew he was right, but fear that Hal was in trouble tightened the tension in her mind. Relief flooded through her when Jasper pulled his horse to a halt, just before sunset one evening, and said there was a camp ahead.

"How do you know?" she asked. "I can't see any wagons."

Jasper lifted his head sniffing. "I can smell wood burning. "Look, that's where they are."

Beyond a rise in the prairie, a light column of smoke rose quivering in the still air. Jasper lifted his horse to a gallop and disappeared into the little valley. Soon he came back to say that there were five wagons, three from High Falls, and one of these belonged to Hal. "He's got a ratty span of reds with our black and whites," he added. "Most of the ox teams look about starved out."

Mandy stared ahead as they topped the rise. "Hal will be glad to see these others again."

"Maybe so, but maybe not," Jasper drawled. She glanced at him in quick surprise, and he added, "You want to drive ahead, Mandy? I'll bring up the oxen."

The five wagons were drawn in a rough circle centered by small camp fires. The mules quickened their pace, and Mandy drew them up skilfully at a little distance from the encampment to wait for Jasper,

who always helped her mother from the wagon. Men from the encampment, some of whom she knew, waved their hats and ran forward to meet her, and one of the first was Hal. He had lost some of his stockiness, and Mandy thought him the handsomer for his loss of weight.

He came straight toward her, his hands outstretched. "Mandy, I might have known you'd follow me. That's just like a woman! Why didn't you come when I first asked you?"

He reached up, and as she put her hands into his and stepped to the wheel-hub, he pulled her down into his arms. Mandy freed herself hastily, under the pretense of slip-knotting the lines round a wheel spoke, and at that moment Jasper and Mrs. Slater came from the rear of the wagon.

HAL reddened when he saw the old lady, but he stood his ground. "I never thought to see you again," he said. "You're looking fine—just fine." He turned to Jasper. "Well, Jas, I see you found my bullocks that strayed away. I'll sure be glad to have them again."

"Strayed, you said?" Jasper grinned contemptuously. "They didn't have the strength to stray. You pretty near starved them to death by starting too early, and you know it. So you're not getting them back."

"That's right," someone called out, and there was a mutter of assent from the other men.

"They're my oxen," Hal shouted. "He's got to give 'em back to me!"

"They're Wyn oxen, as much mine as yours. And I'll be everlastingly dad-blamed if you touch them again," Jasper retorted. "We just got to them in the nick of time."

His fists clenched, Hal took a step forward. His face was scarlet with rage. "A strange thing, Cousin, how you get to everything just in time. Like these oxen—and then there's Mandy's mother. She was dying. I guess you got to her just in time to save her life. And there's Mandy," he went on, his voice silky, "everyone knew she was my girl. Did you get to her?"

Jasper's right fist struck him then, a solid blow on the grinning mouth, and his left came hooking up under the chin and sent Hal backward in a staggering run that ended in a smashing fall. Men who had been standing near the circled wagons ran forward to lift him to his feet. But Hal slipped from their hands and fell again and lay still, the blood running from his battered lips.

"Aw, let him lie," a High Falls man shouted. "He had it coming to him, thinking he was so smart. This just saves us some trouble."

Mandy pushed away the men and, kneeling, lifted Hal's head and wiped the blood away from his mouth. "He made a mistake," she said, her voice ringing with indignation. "Anyone can be wrong. Why don't some of you men take him to his wagon?" She looked around, but no one moved. "You ought to be ashamed of yourselves! You—" she pointed out a young red-headed fellow who watched her with an unwilling admiration—"you hold him up on this side. Jasper, take the other arm. Move him along and get him into his blankets. Don't you see he's unconscious? Are you going to leave him lying here?"

Somehow she bullied them into obeying her, and presently Hal was carried to his wagon. Mrs. Slater slipped her thin old hand into Mandy's. "It's all my fault," she said. "I made you come after Hal, and he's a no-good fellow if ever I saw one. And here we are, miles from home, and all for nothing. Well, there's no fool like an old fool."

"Except a young one. You're in good company," Mandy said grimly. "Here comes Jasper, Mother."

Mrs. Slater remarked that she didn't have much sense, but thank the Lord she knew enough to take a rest now. Jasper walked up to Mandy and began talking, not meeting her eyes.

"I'm sure sorry, Mandy. I never hit Hal before; guess I was never really mad enough. But this time—"

"It doesn't matter, Jasper. You did what you thought right. I don't hold it against you."

"Well, we found him, and that's what

(Concluded on Page 113)

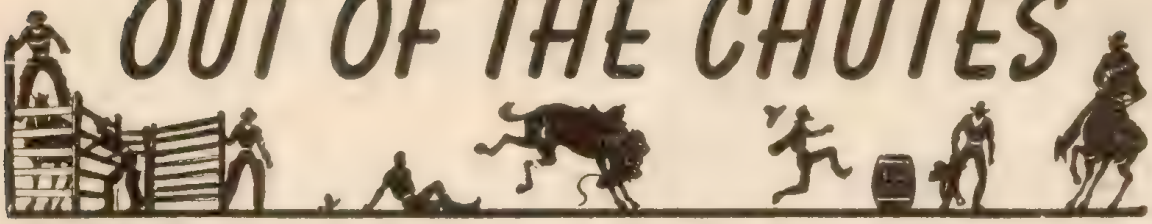
WONDER DRUGS— ARE THEY DANGEROUS?

Thousands upon thousands of Americans are being treated with new "wonder" and "miracle" drugs today. But...can these drugs kill as well as cure? You can't afford to miss the exclusive article on wonder drugs in the current issue of SEE Magazine.

Another SEE Magazine fully-illustrated article, typical of the newsworthy, timely reading available month after month in every issue of SEE.

Buy the current issue of SEE Magazine today.
On sale at all newsstands — only 15c.

OUT OF THE CHUTES



IT'S HARD enough for *people* to mend their ways, to change from being mean and ornery to being kind and cooperative. But for a horse to mend his ways would seem to be just plain impossible. You'd think that a horse who got used to the heady and powerful feeling of tossing cowboys in the dust would never get over enjoying it. We've heard of one that did, though.

His name is Grey Eagle, and his present occupation is rodeoing as a roping horse. Two years ago, though, he was rodeoing as a bucking horse. He's probably the only horse in history from whose back both bronc-riders and calf-ropers have won money.

Plenty of riders remember Grey Eagle as number 305 of the Beutler Bros. string. Plenty of them went sprawling when he cut loose; some of them, including Champion Jim Shoulders, stayed aboard for a ride which was good enough to take them to the pay window. So you can see that Grey Eagle was no slouch as a bucker. He really meant business.

He seems to mean business as a roper, too, for he has carried his owner Edd Coffey to victory at many rodeos during 1954.

Grey Eagle's life began about 12 years ago on the JA Ranch in Clarendon, Texas. Until he was three or four years old he roamed the range in complete liberty, and when he was finally caught in a round-up of mustangs, he didn't take kindly to being broken. You can hardly blame him for objecting to being saddled and ridden, after his life of freedom.

But being unbreakable didn't win him his liberty again. Instead he was sold to the Beutler Bros., rodeo producers of the Southwest, and then branded, named and sent out of the chutes to try his ornery tricks on the top-hands.

He did okay, as we said, for several years, and then he began to slow down. Maybe he figured violence didn't pay. Certainly it was obvious by this time that being man's enemy wasn't getting him anywhere.

At this point he was in the greatest danger of his life. Rodeo producers haven't got feed or stall space for a bronc who won't buck. They say he's lazy or that he's getting old; it never occurs to anyone that the brute might be having a change of heart and just getting friendly toward man.

Well, it hardly ever occurs to anyone—the exception in this case being a pick-up man named Slim Whaley. Slim liked the look of Grey Eagle. He's no beauty, but the quarter-horse stock in him shows, and he's a solid 1150 pounds. Slim also had a hunch that here was a horse with brains as well as stamina.

He asked permission to train Grey Eagle as a roper, and thus saved him from certain doom. Maybe the horse was grateful; certainly he was a good student. In only a few months he had been sold to Edd Coffey. Edd has used him steadily during the past two rodeo seasons, and is looking forward to a busier and even more successful year coming up.

You can still see the brand on Grey Eagle's hip, and Edd calls him by his number, not his name. But that "305" is the only souvenir of his ornery days.

The only time you'd guess the secret of his past is when he's first mounted. He might hump his back a little, as if recalling the days when he sent his riders flying. But the temptation passes quickly, and Grey Eagle goes seriously about his business. He's completely responsive to the slightest pressure of hands or knees, and obeys orders perfectly.

Like most reformed characters, he's even more virtuous than horses who've never been bad.

Adios,
THE EDITORS

Red Sundown

By Ray Gaulden

Floyd Burl watched from the rim, but did not attempt to stop them

THE STORY SO FAR: Wild CLAY GANNON settles down when he falls for banker VINCE RANDALL's daughter JEAN, but Randall, a bigot, still disapproves of Clay, and Jean is unwilling to buck her father. Randall has started a clean-up campaign by having killer FLOYD BURL convicted, but Burl, with the help of his brothers AL and PINTO, escapes, killing SHERIFF SAM KANE. The brothers vow vengeance on the town.

Meanwhile Randall has tried to drive out VALLA McCORD—a widow who runs a hotel with a bad reputation –and her small daughter MICHELLE (MIKE). Clay likes Valla, gets into a fight over her with TURK HESTER. DEPUTY SHERIFF BEN POE, who loves Valla, jealously urges Turk to kill Clay, but in the fight Turk is injured. Poe orders Clay to get out of town.

The Burls shoot stage driver LEE DASH as a warning to the town, and fire at the store where TUGGLE and HODGES, two of the jurymen who convicted Floyd, are hiding. . . .

PART THREE

BEN POE, after telling Clay he would give him an hour to get out of town, went to the sheriff's office. From the window he could watch the street and see if Clay left, but he knew Clay wouldn't leave.

Ben realized he had pushed his luck too far, wanting to impress the townsmen, but he had thought Clay Gannon would be afraid to fool with the law.

Ben had to admit he wasn't the man Sheriff Sam Kane was; he never would be. And it had taken Gannon to prove it to him, to show him up in front of the whole town.

Ben looked down at the badge he had thought would gain him respect. He knew now, that no badge could take the place of guts. And he was a runt. He shot off his mouth to everybody in town, but when it came

to a showdown he couldn't back up his big talk.

In a sudden fit of temper he ripped the badge off and threw it across the room. He was washed up in this town. He would have to sneak off like a coyote. Nothing had gone as he'd planned.

He cursed himself for having taken Turk the bottle. The damned fool probably drank so much it fogged up his head. If Hester had killed Gannon, then he, Ben, wouldn't have a thing to worry about. Even Valla might give in and be a little nicer to him.

Ben got stubborn then. He wasn't going to run away just because Gannon had put a chill in him. I'm as good with a gun as he is, Ben thought—maybe better. Besides, when it comes right down to it, he won't shoot a lawman. He's got more sense than that. You're not afraid of Gannon, Poe. All you've got to do is prove it to the town and to yourself.

POE was feeling better now, was able to grin as he went over and picked up the badge from the floor. He pinned it back on his vest, working out in his mind how he would say, "All right, Gannon. The hour's up."

Ben's fear was gone now and he was convinced he could redeem himself. Then he saw the stage coming in, saw everybody gathering around it. And he knew what had happened. Floyd had made good his promise to get away!

If Kane's been killed, he thought, they'll turn to me. He knew he should be on his way down there, but he was feeling the coldness in his guts again. The Burls were not far away, and when they rode in it would take more than one gun to stop them. Those boys played for keeps.

The townspeople would be waiting for him, but he couldn't force himself to go. The only thing for him to do was get away in a hurry. His horse was out back. He could leave town without being seen.

He was leaving the courthouse when he ran into Ed Mack.

"The Burls just shot the driver," Mack said. "They're up there on the cliff."

Ben could feel Mack's eyes on him, as if trying to probe his mind.

"You going after them, Ben?" Mack asked.

"I'm the law."

"You're wearing a badge, but you aren't fooling me any. I can usually size a man up and tell what he'll do in a tight."

"You figure I'll rabbit?"

"I sure do, Ben. I think you'll tuck tail and be plenty hard to find till it's all over."

"I'll show you!" Ben said. "I'm going to ride up there. When I bring the Burls back, I want to see the look on your face."

"I'll be here," Mack said.

Ben rode away toward the creek. He should keep on riding until he had put miles between himself and this range. But damn it, he had too good a thing here just to throw it up and run. It galled him plenty, too, the way old Mack had looked at him.

He had made some more of his big talk. If he only could ride up to the rim, shoot it out with the Burls, and bring them back draped across their saddles! The town wouldn't be able to do enough for him then.

That wouldn't happen if he lived to be as old as the Sangre de Cristos. But maybe there was a way. Suppose he rode up there and got the Burls to believe he was going to throw in with them. Then, when they weren't looking—

It might take some doing, but Ben got to figuring it out. He rode up from the creek and scouted the residential section until he found a back yard with washing on the line. Riding right into the yard, he grabbed a pillowslip, then cut back to the creek.

FASTENING the white pillowslip to a stick he rode on, wondering if the Burls would shoot him on sight. He was so scared he almost turned around, but he had too much at stake to back out now.

So he forced himself to ride on, waving the pillowslip, calling, "Don't shoot, boys, don't shoot."

The shack still wasn't in sight when Pinto Burl, with a rifle in his hands, appeared from behind a big boulder. "I've had you in my sights for five minutes," Pinto said.

Ben tried not to let Pinto know how scared he was. "I don't have a gun," he said. "I just want to talk to you boys."

"All right, Ben, but you'd better be real careful."

"You don't have to worry about me, Pinto."

"I'm not worried," Pinto said.

Ben rode on, knowing that if he made one wrong move it would be his last. He could feel the gun inside his shirt, hard against his belly. It had five bullets. At close range it would only take three to get the Burls.

The shack was unpainted, the roof about ready to cave in. Floyd was standing in front of the door and Al was near the edge of the cliff, squatting on his boot heels, watching the town below.

Floyd wasn't holding a gun, but he wore one, tied low on his right thigh. A tough son, Ben thought, who could shoot your guts out and then laugh about it.

As Ben rode up, Floyd grinned and said, "You were the damnedest looking thing, waving that white rag over your head."

"I didn't want you boys to cut me down before I got here."

Al Burl said over his shoulder, "I think I'll knock some of the glass out of Tuggle's store window."

"Yeah, go ahead," Floyd said. "Keep 'em jumping."

"There's nobody in sight," Al said, raising the carbine. "It looks like everybody and his brother have moved out and left it for the packrats."

"Most of them," Ben said, "are on the side of the street where you can't see them."

Floyd, still grinning, said, "What I'd like to know, Ben, is how you ever raked up the guts to ride up here, and just what you thought it would get you?"

Ben stepped down slowly. He heard Al's rifle crack, but kept looking at Floyd.

"I've got a bellyful of that bunch down there, Floyd," he said. "I'm sick of having everybody laugh at me all the time."

"There's nothing funny about being a runt, is there, Ben?"

"Not to me," Ben said. "I've taken it as long as I'm going to. I figured you were going to settle with them, and I wanted in on it."

"That's what you had in mind, huh?"

"We've always got along all right, Floyd," Ben said rapidly. "I always figured you boys got a raw deal. Randall the same as killed your dad, then tried to railroad you for shooting that tinhorn. I don't blame you for wanting to pay them off."

Floyd's eyes stayed on Ben, but he spoke to his brothers. "You hear that, boys? Ben's on our side."

BEN had a bad moment, wondering if he were putting it across, or if Floyd were just stringing him along.

"While I was thinking it over," Ben said, "I got an idea I figured the four of us could pull off slick as a whistle."

Ben said, "When it's over, Floyd, we're going to need money enough to take us to Mexico, maybe, and set us up."

"And where are we going to get it, Ben?"

"From Randall's bank," Ben said, with a grin. "There's nobody to stop us from going in there and forcing that weak-kneed Alex to open the safe. We'll get plenty, too. After that we won't have anything to worry about."

"I'll have to hand it to you, Ben. I never thought of that."

"Then you'll deal me in?"

"Sure we will." Floyd smiled. "You're all right, Ben."

Ben tried to smile back, but his lips felt stiff.

Ben could feel the sweat running down his back. He would have no better chance than right now. Pinto was walking away and Al was watching the town, paying no attention to Ben. Floyd was busy lighting his cigarette.

All he had to do was grab the gun from his shirt, catch Floyd while he wasn't expecting it and put a bullet in him, then turn his gun on Al and shoot him in the back. Before Pinto turned around and got the rifle up, Ben could be inside the shack. It might take a little while to nail Pinto, but he'd be in the open while Ben was under cover.

Ben was so scared his hand was shaking, but he reached inside his shirt and pulled the gun out, and for an agonizing second his hopes were high. Then Floyd moved suddenly and a gun was in his hand. It roared and kept on roaring. Ben felt lead tearing into him, until his strength was gone and he fell to the ground.

Dimly, as if from a great distance, he heard Pinto saying, "You get him?"

"Yeah," Floyd said. "Kind of figured he'd wait a little while before he tried it, but he didn't."

"Imagine that crazy lobo thinking he could put one over on us," Pinto said.

Floyd blew smoke from his gun. "We'll have to keep that in mind about the bank. Too bad Ben won't be around to help us spend the money."

Ben lay there on the hard ground, feeling the blood run out of him, knowing he was going fast.

"Get his horse, Pinto," Floyd was saying. "We'll send their deputy back to town—make them a little present of him."

The last thing Ben Poe saw before he died was the smile on Floyd Burl's face.

AFTER Ben Poe left the courthouse, Ed Mack stood on the steps for a time, watching the street down which Ivan Burl used to ride his white stallion. Ivan was gone now, but his sons were still here, three boys who had gotten off the track somewhere along the way.

Mack saw Clay go into the street after the stage driver, and he thought, he's the only one in the whole town that isn't afraid to show himself.

He'd had to throw Clay in jail a couple of times when he was sheriff, but he'd always figured Clay was just full of vinegar, and soon as he got it out of his system he'd settle down.

The stage was still in the middle of the street, and though Mack hadn't heard the stage driver's words, it was a safe bet that Kane was dead inside it, full of lead. Now three killers were up on the rim, and there was no law in Marinoot. Ben Poe wouldn't be back.

Mack went back to the sheriff's office where once his name had been on the glass door. It had been his office, but they had kicked him out, and he knew from the way Kane bawled him out that he wasn't wanted any more even as jailer.

He had tried to be a good lawman. Sure he had made some mistakes, but what man didn't? Maybe the biggest mistake he'd made was in not listening to Martha about that little ranch in the hills where she could have flowers and a garden and a few fruit trees. She'd tried to get him to resign, but he had kept finding excuses why they should wait.

Martha had finally stopped talking about the ranch, and just sat around and worried. It was hard on her, not knowing when he went out whether he'd come back or not. She'd started having spells with her heart, and it wasn't long before she was dead.

He had gone on being sheriff until Randall decided he was getting old and had gone soft, and they needed a new sheriff. It had been hard to swallow his pride, to step aside and let Sam Kane take over. He'd tried not to be bitter, but sometimes he couldn't help hoping that Kane would fall down on the job and Marinoot would have to come to him and ask him to be sheriff again.

He heard boots in the hall, and a moment later a group of townsmen appeared in the doorway.

"We're looking for Ben," Will Hodges said. "Have you seen him?"

"The last time I saw him," Mack said, "he was going after his horse."

The men looked at one another as if they weren't quite sure what to do. Oliver Tuggle said, "Sam Kane's been killed, Ed, and the Burls are up at that old shack back of town."

"I know," Mack said. "I saw the stage come in."

Hodges swallowed with difficulty. "They sent word they're gonna stay up there till sundown, then they're coming after us."

"If that's what they said, boys, they'll be here."

The men came on into the office, but they stayed close together as if they were afraid to get too far apart.

Tuggle said, "Ben won't be back, will he?"

MACK looked at them. This was like the old days when they had come here for his advice. "Maybe Ben went up there to get them."

"You don't believe that, do you, Ed?" Hodges asked.

"No, but you never can tell."

Oliver Tuggle wiped some of the sweat from his face. "We could wire Denver for help, but it couldn't get here in time."

"Not before sundown," Mack said.

"What are we going to do, Ed? Floyd's going to kill us."

"You boys had a lot of faith in Kane. Now that he's not here why don't you find out from Randall what to do?"

The men looked away, unable to meet his steady gaze.

Tuggle said, "You were a good sheriff, Ed. Took guts for a man to do some of the things you did."

"It was what I was being paid to do."

"Yeah, but you took a lot of chances that you didn't have to."

This was the day Mack had looked forward to through the lonesome years. He had pictured how he would laugh in their faces. Now he didn't feel like laughing, and he just sat there in the swivel chair and looked at them.

Hodges reached in his pocket and placed something shiny on the desk. "It's Kane's badge, Ed. I got it down at the undertaker's."

Mack picked it up, turning it slowly in his hand.

They were watching him with a desperate kind of hope.

He said, "You told me I was too old for the job, and I'm older now than I was then."

"You've got a lot of years left yet, Ed," Tuggle said.

And Hodges said, "We'll see that you get more money than Kane was getting."

"You're wasting your time, Will."

Tuggle came up close to the desk. "We need you, Ed. Don't turn us down."

Disgust was strong in Mack. He said, "Why don't you get out of here before I get sick to my stomach?"

They stood there shuffling their feet for a moment, then turned and left the office. He got up and walked to the window. The four of them were outside, watching a horse come down the street. It was Ben Poe's buckskin, and Ben was hanging across the saddle, face down.

It just went to show you, Mack thought, that you couldn't always tell about a man. Ben sure had fooled him by going to see the Burls. He had been almost certain Ben would make a run for it.

By the time he got outside they had untied Ben's body and laid it in the shade at the side of the building. They stood looking at him and at each other as if they couldn't decide what to do next.

"He must have gone up there," Hodges said, glancing at the cliff. "Maybe Ben wasn't all wind after all."

"Maybe not," Tuggle said. "But he's dead now."

THE men looked at Mack, but he left them standing there and went back inside. The badge was still lying on the desk and he looked at it, but didn't pick it up. He wanted to, though, wanted to pin it on and go out there and show them he still had what it took.

He had thought he would get satisfaction out of having them come to him, but he had felt nothing but disgust at the way they had stood there with fear so plain in their eyes, ready to do anything if he would only help them.

They were a different breed from their fathers. Tuggle's dad and a lot of the others who were gone now wouldn't have stood around shaking in their boots. They'd have been cleaning their guns, and when the Burls came they'd have been waiting for them. But not this bunch. They were too busy making money to learn how to handle a gun.

All the time he had refused to admit they were right about him, but now, alone in the office, the realization came that he had been kidding himself for a long time. He was an old man, clining to a reputation he'd made a lot of years ago.

He left the office and walked down the hall, slowly climbing the stairs to the jail. This was where he belonged, here in this dinky room, only now it would be harder to take because at last he knew the truth about himself. He was an old man with a key ring and six cells to keep clean.

He looked at the cot in the corner. Some night he would lie down on it and the next morning he wouldn't wake up. That was the way it'd be.

He crossed to the window and looked out at the cliff, then up at the sky where black clouds were massing in the west. Less than six hours of daylight left. Then the Burls would be riding.

Suddenly he felt tired, and he sat down on the cot. It was going to be a bloody sunset.

CLAY was in the hotel lobby talking with Hal Abers, when Abers glanced out the window and said, "Look out there."

"Ben Poe," Clay said, following Abers' gaze.

He went to the door. By the time he got there the buckskin was past, going on down the middle of the street toward the courthouse.

From the way Ben was tied to the saddle Clay knew he was dead. He wondered how the deputy had come to be killed.

He stepped onto the porch. Men in front of the courthouse were staring at the horse coming toward them, and none of them was moving. Along the street other men were staring, but doing nothing, saying nothing. Then a gust of wind from the cliff brought laughter, a low, taunting sound in the silence.

Clay knew then that Ben Poe, the little man with the big talk, had gone up there and the Burls had killed him and sent his body back to put more fear into the town. But he couldn't see Ben doing it, and he was puzzled as he turned back inside.

Valla was crossing the lobby toward the stairs. "I'm going to see about Michelle," she said. "It's time she was up from her nap."

Hal Abers had gone into the dining room, but Clay remained near the window, watching the street while he rolled a smoke. He was starting to light it when he caught the quick step of Valla's heels in the upstairs hall.

He heard her calling, "Michelle, where are you?" Urgency was in her voice.

Clay dropped his unlighted cigarette in a cuspidor. He climbed the stairs two at a time, hearing Valla going along the hall, rapping on doors and calling Michelle's name. When he reached the top, Valla was at the far end of the hall talking to a man who stood in the doorway of one of the rooms. The man shook his head. As Valla turned away, Clay saw the anxiety in her eyes.

"She's around somewhere," he said, trying to calm her.

Valla shook her head. "If she were in the hotel she could hear me calling."

"She told me she was going to take a nap," Clay said.

"But that was two hours ago, Clay, and her bed isn't mussed."

He frowned, remembering that Mike had told him she wanted to go for a ride on Buttons. The same thought must have been in Valla's mind, for she said, "I usually let her go for a ride every day, but this morning I told her it was too hot."

"The little dickens," Clay said. "She could have slipped out the back way."

"She's never done anything like that before."

"There's always a first time," Clay said. "And she's pretty crazy about that horse. Let's take a look out back."

They went down the rear stairway. Valla said, "She just never disobeys me."

"When kids get their minds set on something, you can't tell."

Clay was trying not to show too much concern, but he was worried. If Mike had gone for a ride she might take the trail that led past the shack on the rim.

WHEN they reached the small corral he had built, Clay saw that it was empty. Valla cried, "Clay, she's gone."

"No need to get all worked up," he said gently. "She's probably down on the creek somewhere."

Valla looked at the cliff. "She usually goes up there, and she doesn't know about the Burls."

"They wouldn't bother her."

"I'm not so sure," Valla said, the worry in her eyes deepening. "I wouldn't put anything past men that can shoot anyone down like they did Lee Dash."

Clay felt the same way, but he said, "Nothing's going to happen to Mike, but I'll find her and bring her home."

He walked swiftly to the edge of town. When he passed the shack where Hester had been waiting for him, the queasy feeling came to his stomach. He wondered if Turk would live or die. He didn't know why he should care after the man had tried to kill him, but he did.

He went on, cutting across Main Street to the livery stable. There was no sign of Reddick, and he remembered seeing the liveryman in front of the bank a little while ago.

Clay saddled his gelding and rode out of the barn, heading east toward the creek back of town, wanting to make sure that Mike wasn't down there before he looked farther. It was possible she had gone fishing, so he went to her favorite spots. All the time uneasiness was growing in him.

A half mile beyond town he turned around and came back, following the creek in the other direction. On the north end of town he

left the stream and rode through some of the residential section. It wasn't likely, but Mike might have stopped to play with someone.

He passed the Tuggle house and saw Mrs. Tuggle standing on the front porch looking in the direction of town.

"Have you seen anything of the McCord kid?" Clay asked, reining up at the edge of the walk.

The woman shook her head. "No, but I wish you'd tell me what Ben Poe was doing here."

"I don't know," Clay said.

"I was down the street," Mrs. Tuggle said, "but one of my neighbors saw him ride into the back yard and grab one of my pillowcases off the line. Now why would he do a thing like that?"

"Wouldn't have the slightest idea," Clay said. He touched the brim of his hat and rode on. Convinced now that there was only one other place Mike could be, he swung toward the hill back of town. He kept telling himself that the Burls wouldn't harm Mike but, like Valla had said, you couldn't tell about them.

Before he reached the shack, Pinto Burl stood up from behind a large boulder, covering Clay with a Winchester.

"What are you doing up here, Gannon?"

"I'm looking for the McCord kid."

Pinto said, "Didn't you stop to think we might have shot your head off?"

"Figured you'd spot me coming up the trail," Clay said. "And since I wasn't on the jury, I couldn't see that I had much to worry about."

Pinto didn't relax and the rifle was still steady in his hands. "I'm not taking any chances with you, Gannon. Maybe you've decided to play the hero or something."

"You know me better than that, Pinto. Like I said, I'm just looking for the kid. Have you seen anything of her?"

"Yeah, she rode past here a little while ago."

CLAY rode on toward Pinto, but he kept his hand away from his gun. Burl was watching him carefully.

"Just don't try anything with us, Gannon," Pinto said coldly. "We've set out to do something, and we aren't letting you or anybody else stop us."

Clay put his horse on up the trail. When he reached the shack, Floyd was standing in front.

He said, "That bunch in town send you up to confab with us, Clay?"

"They aren't sending me anywhere," Clay said. "I'm looking for Valla's girl. She's got a habit of riding up here."

"Yeah, she was by, but she didn't stay long," Floyd said, grinning. "Did her ma figure we might hold her as a hostage or something?"

Clay said, "You can't blame Valla for being worried."

Floyd laughed. "How are the rest of them taking it down there?"

"Plenty scared," Clay told him. "Don't know which way to turn."

Floyd's face was dark and ugly. "That's the way I worked it out, so they'd have plenty of time to think about what they did. Let them stew in their own juice awhile, and maybe some of them will blow their brains out."

"Ben's horse had just come back before I left," Clay said.

Since Mike wasn't here there was no need to worry. She knew how to ride, and the country was familiar to her.

Floyd laughed again. "What do you think of that runt coming up here and trying to pull a fast one on us? Wanted to throw in with us, he said, didn't blame us a bit, and all the time he had a gun in the front of his shirt and was just waiting for us to turn our backs."

"Even that," Clay said, "took more guts than I figured Ben had."

"Talking of guts," Floyd said, "you're about the only one left down there that's got any, and after the things you said in jail last night, I'm not so sure what you'll do come sundown."

"I'll sit tight," Clay said. "I've got no love for those twelve men you're after."

Floyd's moody eyes were intent on Clay's face. "The way I see it, with Kane and Ben dead, that crowd's going to be looking mighty hard for somebody to save their skins."

"They don't like me worth a damn, and never have."

"They could have a change of heart between now and sundown. They might make you a nice little offer."

Clay answered, "They know what I'll say."

"From the way you talked last night," Floyd said, "you've been doing some wondering about a misspent life. Once a man starts that, you've got to watch out for him. Right now you figure you know what you're going to do, but before sundown you'll have a chance to do some more thinking, and it's hard to tell what you'll come up with."

"I shot Turk Hester this morning," Clay said. "He's in bad shape, maybe going to die, so the town's shying away from me like I had smallpox."

"Turk had a pretty good rep with a gun."

"What does that prove?"

"That you're faster, a good man to call on if there's nobody else around."

"They'd have a hell of a time getting me to pull their chestnuts out of the fire."

FLOYD stood on one foot, with the other against the front of the house, and his thumbs hooked in his gunbelt. He said slowly, his eyes never leaving Clay, "You'd be playing it smart if you went on back to that outfit of yours and stayed there till this is over."

"Kinda thought I'd stick around and watch the show."

Floyd's face was tighter, meaner. "Let me give you some advice. Don't decide you can't stand by and see it happen."

"I told you, Floyd, I'm going to sit tight."

"I hope you do, Clay. But if you don't, I'll kill you as quick as I will anybody else."

"That I believe."

They were looking straight at each other, and Clay saw and felt the viciousness of the man before him. Then he nudged the gelding with his boot heels and rode away from the shack, knowing it wouldn't take much for them to cut him down right now.

Floyd had always been hard, Clay thought. But had this cold savagery been in him all the time? Or had his mind got twisted after the old man died? This morning Clay had thought he wasn't much different from Floyd, but shooting Turk hadn't made him feel good. He wondered how Floyd had felt after killing the gambler—though he doubted that Floyd could feel anything.

Still, he wasn't sure. Under different circumstances his reaction might not have been the same. Suppose his father had been ruined by a man, and later that same man had been responsible for Clay's going to jail? Unless you were faced with something like that, you couldn't say for sure what you'd do.

HE RODE on, scanning the ridge for Mike, but he kept thinking of the Burls. He wondered if Floyd had stopped to think what he was going to do after tonight. Every lawman in the country would be looking for him, and they'd never let up. But he guessed Floyd would worry about that after sundown.

A mile from the shack, where the ridge ended in a sheer dropoff, he saw Mike's spotted pony standing in the meager shade of a cedar. Mike was picking up rocks when she heard him coming, and she turned around.

"Hello, Clay. What are you doing up here?"

"I came to find you."

Michelle looked at the rock she was holding. "I suppose you and Mommy are pretty mad at me?"

"Don't you think we ought to be?"

She put the rock down and brushed her hands. "I wasn't a bit sleepy, and when I went down to see Buttons he acted like he wanted to go for a ride."

"Let's get back before your mom gets more worried than she already is."

"I don't see why she'd worry. She's let me come up here lots of times."

"I know, but she told you to take a nap, and you didn't mind her."

Michelle hung her head and kicked at one of the rocks. "I never went away like that before, but I wanted to go so bad. I'm sorry. I won't do anything like this again."

He smiled at her then. "I can't stay sore at you, but you may have a harder time making up with your mom."

She went over to her pony, caught the reins, and swung onto his bare back. When she was alongside Clay she said, "Will you talk to Mommy for me?"

"Nope," Clay said. "You'll have to take your medicine."

"You said we were pardners."

"We are, but that doesn't make any difference."

"It does, too," Michelle said. "If you got in trouble, I'd stick up for you. Let's race."

"You don't want to run your horse when it's hot like this," Clay said. "He wouldn't last long if you did. You stop by that old shack up yonder?"

Michelle nodded. "I come to it all the time, but today three men were there and they chased me off. One of them was mean-looking. He scared me so I didn't stay long."

"They're bad men," Clay said, wishing there were more than the one trail leading down. "If they start anything when we go by, you see how quick you can get to town."

"Will they try to hurt us?"

"I don't think so," Clay said. "But in case they do, you remember what I told you."

He didn't want to frighten her, but he was uneasy. Floyd might decide there was no use taking a chance on what Clay Gannon would do when the showdown came. They could kill him now and not have to worry. Already they had killed three men, so one more wouldn't make much difference.

When they came to the shack, Floyd was standing at the side of it. He stared at Clay, but he didn't say anything, and there was no attempt to stop them. Still Clay didn't relax, and he was ready to slap Mike's pony on the rump if a bullet came from behind.

Then they were past the shack and he grinned at Mike, making light talk to take her mind off the three men on the rim.

They reached town and rode down the alley to the rear of the hotel. Valla appeared in the kitchen doorway, relieved when she saw Mike. And Clay, thinking of what could have happened, was relieved, too.

"All right, young lady," Valla said. "You put Buttons in the corral and come inside."

Michelle looked hopefully at Clay, and he wanted to tell Valla not to be too rough on her, but he decided he'd better keep out of it. Valla knew more about raising kids than he did. He watched Mike go into the kitchen, and was starting to unsaddle the gelding when Alex Norris came down the alley and spoke to him.

"Mr. Randall would like to see you."

THE gelding was between them, and Clay looked at Alex across the saddle. Norris was the man Vince Randall had planned to have his daughter marry. And he was her kind, with a good background, a lot of polish. That he wasn't much of a man didn't matter.

"What does Randall want?" Clay asked, unbuckling a cinch.

"He didn't tell me."

Clay said, "I'm busy right now."

"Mr. Randall said it was important."

"And I'm supposed to jump, the way you do when he yells?"

Alex's face turned red. There was dust on the toes of his buttoned shoes and he looked uncomfortable standing in the hot sun. He said, "I work for him."

"Sure, I know," Clay said. "You're just a pencil pusher."

Alex's face colored even more, but he said, "You have no call to insult me, Gannon."

Clay looked at him. He did have a right, because Norris was one of the reasons why Jean wouldn't marry him. Of course it might be that Alex was so dumb he didn't know what had been going on.

"Forget it," Clay said shortly. "And tell Randall that I won't be able to make it."

Norris stood there for a moment, uncertain, as if he were afraid his boss would blame him for Clay's refusal. He seemed about to say something; then, evidently deciding against it, he turned and started back up the alley. Curious about what Randall wanted, Clay let the cashier go a short distance before he called to him.

"On second thought, you can tell Randall I'll drop around when I find the time."

Alex nodded and went on.

Clay stared after him a moment, thinking of Randall and deciding that he'd keep the banker waiting a while just for the hell of it. Yesterday it would have been different. He'd have gone right down then because he would have wanted to stay on the good side of Randall. But now, after seeing Jean this morning, it didn't matter.

"Let him wait," Clay thought, smiling to himself.

When he had put the gelding into the corral with Mike's pony, he walked to the street through a passageway between the hotel and Miller's butcher shop. He saw broken glass on several porches, and glanced up at the cliff. Al Burl was having himself a fine time shooting out windows.

The east side of the street was still deserted. On the west side men stood in tight little groups. Fear had them by the throat, and they were getting desperate. It was only about four hours till sundown.

Randall was in the doorway of his bank, talking with Alex Norris. When Alex went on inside Randall remained there, his eyes roving the street and coming to rest on Clay. Standing under the wooden awning in front of the butcher shop, Clay rolled a cigarette with deliberate slowness. He knew Randall was watching him, but he did not look in the banker's direction.

He finished smoking the cigarette, flipped it into the street, and started across to the other side. Sunligh winked on a rifle barrel up on the rim, and Clay felt his stomach muscles go taut as a bullet kicked up dust close to his boots. They could see who it was, he thought, and they weren't trying to hit him, just showing him what they could do if they wanted to.

The townsmen were pressing back against the building fronts, fear in their eyes. He went past them, saying nothing.

Murphy was looking across the street at his saloon. He said to Lew Witham, "I walked out and left my safe open."

"You'd better forget the safe," Witham said, "and stay where you are. Let the money go to hell."

Clay smiled at them and, without stopping, said, "Day's about gone."

Both men glared at him, but neither answered.

CLAY took his time, walking slowly. Randall was still in the bank doorway. Don't chew on that stogie so hard, Clay thought. I'll get around after while, but I'm going to take my sweet time about it.

He stopped in front of the Kadee Cafe, idly looking at the old coins on display in the window. He had seen them many times before, and they held no interest for him.

His gunbelt, the one that had belonged to Johnny McCord, didn't hang right, and he decided it would feel better if there were another notch in it. While he was thinking of that, Bix Kadee appeared in the doorway.

"You've got a lot of old money there," Clay said absently.

Kadee always warmed up to anyone showing an interest in his collection. He said, "I've picked it up here and there, sent away for most of it. Know what that stuff sets you back?"

"Plenty, I bet."

"It does, but I figure it keeps my mind occupied and gives me something to do besides squabble with the old lady."

"Speaking of your wife," Clay said, "is there any truth to that story about her chasing you through town one night during a snowstorm, you in your night shirt and her right behind you with a meat ax?"

"I don't know how a story like that gets started." Kadee was not as friendly as before.

Clay glanced down at his gunbelt. "You got something I can punch another hole in this thing with?"

"Got an ice pick I guess you could use."

"That ought to do it."

Kadee glanced along the street before he stepped back inside. "I'm glad I wasn't on that jury," he said. "I almost got hooked, too, but I told them the old lady wasn't feeling good and I couldn't get anybody else to look after the place."

Clay went inside and sat down at the counter, looking over the menu while Kadee went into the kitchen after the ice pick. When the cafe man came back and laid the pick down, Clay said, "Long as I'm here, you might as well give me something to eat."

"You always eat at the hotel. I figured maybe my grub wasn't good enough for you."

"A man gets used to a certain place," Clay said, unbuckling the gunbelt and laying it on the counter. "If I'm going to use your pick, I ought to spend a little money."

Kadee wiped at the counter. "I guess that's only fair," he said. "What are you going to have?"

"Oh, I don't know," Clay said, looking at the menu again. "Maybe some of that roast beef and hashed browns will hold me till supper."

"I know men in this town," Kadee said, "that won't have any appetite come supper time."

"I wouldn't take that bet," Clay said, working the sharp point of the ice pick into the leather, making a new hole. "Sun goes down about seven, doesn't it?"

Kadee nodded and looked at the clock on the wall. "Just about three hours and thirty minutes from now."

WORKING on the gunbelt, Clay thought of Johnny McCord and wondered why a man couldn't be satisfied with one woman. Why did he have to get mixed up with some floozie when he had a good wife? Seemed like after Mike was born Johnny should stay home looking after his family.

Clay smiled when he thought of Mike. If he ever did get married and have any kids he wanted one of them to be like her. The little dickens had sure gotten under his hide. Going to be a looker when she grows up, he thought, just like her mother. Smart as a whip, too.

But a hotel was no place for a kid like Mike. She ought to be where there was a lot of room to run around in.

"You get it fixed?" Kadee asked, coming back from the kitchen with Clay's order.

"Yeah," Clay said, buckling the gunbelt back on. "Feels better now."

When he left the cafe, Vince Randall was no longer in the bank doorway, but Clay could see him inside, walking up and down. Might as well find out what he wants, Clay thought, turning up the street.

He could feel the eyes on him when he reached the bank and he paused for a moment outside the brick building, wondering why everybody was watching him as if a lot depended on his meeting with Randall. Maybe they knew something he didn't.

Shrugging, he stepped inside. Randall stopped his pacing.

"It took you long enough to get here," Randall said, frowning.

"I don't like to move in a hurry," Clay said.

Randall was irritated. He wasn't used to waiting for anyone. But he seemed to be trying to hide his feelings. He turned toward the door of his office. "Come on inside, Gannon, and we can talk."

Clay hesitated, glancing about the outer office. He felt Alex Norris's eyes on him, but when he looked at the cashier's cage Alex dropped his gaze and was suddenly very busy behind the wicket.

Randall was holding the office door open, trying to hide his impatience as he waited for Clay to come in. When the door closed behind them Randall indicated a chair, went behind the desk and started to sit down, then got back up and reached for the hand-carved hardwood box on the desk.

"Cigar?"

"Never smoke them," Clay said.

Randall took one, bit the end off, and sat back in his chair. "I imagine you're curious as to why I sent for you, Gannon."

"A little."

Randall pulled his chair closer to the desk. "After thinking it over," he said, "I've decided that I didn't use good judgment the day I turned down your request for a loan."

"That right?"

Randall nodded, and moved some papers on the desk. From the way his hands stuck to them, Clay knew there was perspiration in his palms.

The banker brushed the papers aside and said, "I presume you'd still like to buy some good breeding stock?"

"I sure would."

"And if you had that range next to your place you could go into ranching on a much larger scale?"

"That's right."

"Of course it will take a sizable sum to swing the deal, probably five or six thousand."

"Five, anyway."

Randall put his hands down flat on the desk. "All right, Gannon. I'm going to let you have that amount, and when the note falls due, if you need a little more time we won't worry about it."

"Now tell me what I've got to do to earn it."

"Not much. Just stop the Burls."

Clay laughed. "Sure, that'd be easy. Nothing to it."

RANDALL removed the cigar from his mouth and looked at the chewed end. "It shouldn't be too hard for a man who was good enough to get Turk Hester."

"Funny," Clay said, smiling thinly. "That time I was in here I was sitting in this same chair and you were telling me what a poor risk I was, how you hadn't built your bank dealing with my kind. Can't remember all you said, but you really laid it on."

Temper was in Randall's eyes, but he was trying to keep it out of his voice. "Now don't hold it against me because I acted a little hasty. I'm offering to lend you a lot of money."

"Providing I keep the Burls off you and make a target of myself." Clay pushed the chair back and stood up. "You think all you've got to do is dangle a little of your stinking money in front of a man's nose and he'll do anything you want."

"Now see here—" Randall said, starting to get up.

"You see here," Clay said. He moved close to the desk, put his hands on it and leaned across it, his face not far from Randall's. "You've had everybody in this town afraid to move unless you said so, had them bowing and scraping to you until it was enough to make a man sick, and all because you had a pile of money and there was so many people needing some of it."

Randall sat back, his face working.

Clay went on, "It wasn't hard for you to get folks to see things your way, convince them of the kind of town Marinoot ought to be. You decided who could stay, who had to go, and you brought in Sam Kane to get the job done. I was one of those you wanted to get rid of—a no-account trouble-maker. Now you have the gall to call me down here and try to talk me into saving your neck!"

Randall wet his lips. "I'm giving you a chance to prove yourself."

"Like hell," Clay said, his voice heavy with disgust. "You've played God for a long time, and now that everything you've built up is about ready to fall down around your ears, you're turning to me, the only one you can think of that might keep the Burls from killing you."

"You'd better think it over, Gannon. Five thousand dollars is a lot of money."

"Mister, you haven't got enough money in this bank to buy me."

Sweat ran down into Randall's eyes. "Be reasonable, Gannon. The Burls are killers. You've seen what they've already done."

"Sure, but I don't owe this town a thing. Find somebody else to pull the Burls off your back. You haven't got long to do it, either. Me, I'm going to find a safe place and watch what happens."

He shoved back from the desk and was starting for the door when Randall called, "Wait, Gannon. I'll make it worth your while."

"You're wasting your breath," Clay said, and left the office.

Outside on the walk he stopped to make a cigarette. He wondered how much it had cost Randall to show that side of himself, the weakness that he had kept so well hidden until now. And a week ago I would have jumped at the chance to please him.

He thought of Jean. It would be hard now to patch things up between them. And the realization that he wanted to, even after the way she'd acted this morning, made him angry with himself. She's not for you, he thought. Why can't you get it through your head?

When he looked down the street, he saw that Murphy evidently had decided to try to get back into his saloon. With a glance at the cliff, the Irishman ran into the street. He was almost across it when something struck him in the back and sent him running forward. Clay heard the report of the rifle. Murphy kept going until he reached the saloon porch. There he stumbled through the batwings, his head inside, his feet on the porch.

Twelve men, Clay thought. And now there were only eleven.

AFTER Clay left the Randall house that morning, Jean watched him from the front window. A part of her wanted to call to him, tell him she would marry him now, today, as he had asked. But another part of her, stronger than the other, said, let him go because you know he's right. It would never work.

She saw a buggy that was being driven from the direction of town stop beside Clay, and she recognized Valla McCord. Curious as to what the woman was doing in this part of town, Jean remained at the window, watching them until Valla glanced at the house.

Sure that the McCord woman had seen her, Jean turned away, not waiting to find out what it was Valla handed Clay. That it could be a gun never occurred to her. She went into the kitchen, thinking, Valla's his kind of woman, cheap and common.

She realized then that she was reacting ex-

actly as her father would have done in the same circumstances, and it was not a pleasant thought. But she wondered if many of her father's views were not implanted so deep that they had become a part of her.

Before she met Clay she had found little to criticize her father for. He was an important man in Marinoot, admired and respected. Only the elite of the town were entertained at the Randall house. Then she had started seeing Clay, and for a while he had made her forget her social position, caused her to become dissatisfied with the life she knew.

If Alex could only arouse her the way Clay did, perhaps she would never have been attracted to Clay in the first place.

She sat there with the coffee in front of her, forgetting it until the cup was cold. It was almost time for Mary to be getting back from her marketing. But Jean was in no frame of mind to talk to anyone, certainly not to the hired girl with her silly chatter of the blacksmith's son and how they planned to get married as soon as his father started paying him for the work he did.

She went to the back door and called to Niles Waberly, the handyman, who was working in the yard, "Will you get my buggy ready, Niles?"

"Yes ma'am, Miss Randall. Right away."

Jean went to her room and changed to a riding habit, restless and wanting to get off somewhere so she could think things out. When she came back downstairs and went into the yard, Niles had the team hitched to the buggy and was holding the lines, waiting for her.

"If Mr. Randall comes home," she said, "tell him I've gone for a drive. I don't know when I'll be back."

Niles nodded and watched her drive away.

When the buggy was out of the yard and onto Harwood, she saw some of their neighbors watching her, and wondered how many of them had seen Clay when he had come to the house this morning.

On Harwood she drove east, away from the town. When she came to the bridge where she had waited for Clay, memories filled her mind of nights she had spent there, of the thrill of a man's wanting her and taking her.

[*Turn page*]

WOODWORKING

LEARN The Easy Way!

Low Cost Home Craft Courses Now Available

Make money. Become a skilled woodworker. Interstate's new woodworking course tells and shows how to turn out hundreds of professionally constructed and finished wood projects with hand and power tools. Twenty-two profusely illustrated manuals. Over 1,000 pages. Over 75 projects. Written by expert instructors. The *only* complete course available today! Get full information without obligation...today.

Write for FREE Booklet

INTERSTATE TRAINING SERVICE
SCHOOL OF WOODWORKING
DEPT. F-78-E, PORTLAND 13, OREGON

EAT ANYTHING WITH FALSE TEETH

If you have trouble with plates that slip, rock and cause sore gums—try Brimms Plasti-Liner. One application makes plates fit *snugly without powder or paste,* because Brimms Plasti-Liner hardens permanently to your plate. It relines and refits loose plates in a way no powder or paste can do. Even on old rubber plates you get good results six months to a year or longer. **YOU CAN EAT ANYTHING!** Simply lay soft strip of Plasti-Liner on troublesome upper or lower. Bite and it molds perfectly. *Easy to use,* tasteless, odorless, harmless to you and your plates. Removable as directed. Money back if not completely satisfied. *Ask your druggist!*

BRIMMS PLASTI-LINER
THE PERMANENT DENTURE RELINER

ADDRESS POSTCARDS AT HOME!!
write BOX 14, BELMONT, MASS.

FREE FOR ASTHMA

If you suffer with attacks of Asthma and choke and gasp for breath, if restful sleep is difficult because of the struggle to breathe, don't fail to send at once to the Frontier Asthma Company for a FREE trial of the FRONTIER ASTHMA MEDICINE, a preparation for temporary symptomatic relief of paroxysms of Bronchial Asthma. No matter where you live or whether you have faith in any medicine under the sun, send today for this free trial. It will cost you nothing.

FRONTIER ASTHMA CO., 462 NIAGARA ST. — 819-W FRONTIER BLDG., BUFFALO 1, N. Y.

BE A *Nurse*

MAKE $50-$60 A WEEK

You can learn practical nursing at home in spare time. Course endorsed by physicians. Thousands of graduates. 56th yr. One graduate has charge of 10-bed hospital. Another saved $400 while learning. Equipment included. Men, women 18 to 60. High school not required. Easy tuition payments. Trial plan. Write today.

CHICAGO SCHOOL OF NURSING
Dept. 425, 25 East Jackson Blvd., Chicago 4, Ill.
Please send free booklet and 16 sample lesson pages.
Name .....
City ..... *State* ..... *Age* .....

HOW could I have done it? she thought. I carried on like some silly schoolgirl, behaved like one of the women from the kind of houses my father has done away with.

She swung south, taking a trail that circled the town. At first she had no destination in mind, but soon she realized the buggy was going in the direction of Clay's ranch. She had paid little attention to the place, because it was Clay she had been thinking of when she had gone that way before.

It was past twelve o'clock by the time she reached the ranch house and, since she had not eaten breakfast, the need for food was growing in her. Driving into the barren yard, she looked at the small log house and thought, this was to have been my future home.

Emmett Miles, the old man she had seen with Clay on several occasions, came to the doorway and nodded to her. "Afternoon, ma'am. If you're looking for Clay, he's supposed to be in town."

"Yes, I know. I was just out for a drive and came farther than I intended."

From the way Emmet was regarding her, Jean suspected he knew what had been going on. And she had tried so hard to keep anyone from finding out! With a touch of anger she thought, Clay probably bragged to him.

"I just finished dinner," Emmett said. "Reckon there's enough left, if you'd care to have a bite."

"I'm starved," Jean admitted.

"Drive your buggy in the shade there at the side of the house," Emmett said, coming into the yard. "Hot in that sun."

He didn't act as if he were used to being around women, Jean thought, as he helped her down. He was an untidy old man with a heavy beard and tobacco juice on his chin. She hadn't noticed that until she was close to him, and now she could smell the sweat, too.

"I suppose I really shouldn't stay," she said.

"Suit yourself, ma'am." Emmett shrugged. "There's stew on the stove. You're welcome to it. But, if you'll excuse me, I've got to get back to work."

He started away, then swung around, asking, "Anything doing in town?"

"I heard that Clay got in a fight and spent the night in jail."

"Right back where he started." Emmett shook his head. "Any trouble with the Burls?"

"No. Sheriff Kane left town with Floyd on the morning stage."

"Kind of expected Al and Pinto to try something," Emmett said. "But maybe they got scared."

When he had gone on toward the barn Jean hesitated, then entered the house. It was the first time she'd seen the inside, and she stood for a moment, looking about, thinking, this is where he was going to bring me—a two-room shack with home-made furniture and no rugs to cover the rough floor.

Had he really expected her to live here? She walked over to the cookstove. It was clean, that much she could say for it, and the conglomeration in the smoke-blackened kettle smelled good. But when she thought of that dirty old man preparing it, she knew she couldn't eat a bite.

As she turned from the stove, a shirt she remembered Clay's wearing one night caught her attention. It hung over the back of a chair and she looked at it, thinking of him. Then she saw the stains under the armpits, and recalled the spotless white shirts that Alex wore.

Still hungry, she left the house and got in her buggy. There was no sign of Emmett as she drove out of the yard, starting the trip back to town.

IT WAS mid-afternoon and she was still a half mile from Marinoot when a man coming from town stopped her. "I wouldn't go through town if I were you, ma'am."

"Why not?"

"The Burls are on the loose, ma'am. They've killed the sheriff and his deputy and got everybody else bottled up down there and are watching them from that cliff back of town."

"My father?" Jean asked fearfully.

"I don't know," the man said. "I heard about it on the outskirts, didn't go any closer than that. They say the Burls are waiting till sundown. Then they're coming in to kill the men who were on the jury."

Jean couldn't believe it. Her father had seemed so sure it wouldn't happen. When she started to drive on the man said, "If I were you I'd take the creek road, and stay away from Main Street."

By the time Jean reached the turn-off the

buggy was rolling fast, but she kept urging the team on. When she reached home she jumped down and ran inside, calling her father, hoping that he had come home early.

Mary Estes appeared in the dining room doorway, her face pale. "Did you hear what happened, Miss Jean?"

"Just a little while ago. Have you seen Father?"

"No, and you've been gone so long that I was getting worried."

"I'd better go see about him," Jean said, starting for the door.

Mary grabbed her. "You can't go uptown with those killers watching everybody! It's awful!" Mary shook her head. "First Clay Gannon shot Turk Hester, and then the Burls came, and everybody's scared to death."

"Clay shot a man?" Jean stared at her.

"I heard the talk when I went to do the marketing," Mary told her. "I never did get the straight of it, but Ben Poe tried to run Clay out of town and Clay wouldn't go. Now Kane's dead and Ben, too, and the Lord only knows how many more will die before it's over."

Jean began walking up and down the hall. Her father had been foreman of the jury, the one the Burls would want to get more than any of the others.

Every little while she went to the window and looked out, and she could see some of the neighbors on their porches. Across the street, Mrs. Shire was wringing her hands.

Jean wished now she hadn't gone for the drive. She looked at the clock on the mantel. It was less than three hours till sundown. She couldn't just stay here in the house and wait. Her father might already be dead! She had to find out, had to go to him.

Niles Waberly was starting to drive the buggy into the yard when Jean stopped him.

"I've got to go up town," Jean said.

Waberly looked worried. "You shouldn't go. The Burls—"

"They wouldn't shoot a woman."

MARY ESTES ran onto the porch, calling to her to stay, but Jean drove on. Other people along Harwood tried to stop her, but she kept the team moving. When

[*Turn page*]

"Dissatisfied with our routine jobs, we became Motel Managers, thanks to your home study training. Now we earn good pay, work and live in beautiful surroundings." This is typical of the many who have taken the National Motel Training at home, in their spare time. 50,000 Motels offer new opportunities. Write for FREE information today!

NATIONAL MOTEL TRAINING
404 Lake St., Dept. TF-5, Oak Park, Ill.

RUPTURED?
Get Relief This Proven Way

Why try to worry along with trusses that gouge your flesh—press heavily on hips and spine—enlarge opening—fail to hold rupture? You need the Cluthe. No leg-straps or cutting belts. Automatic adjustable pad holds at real opening—follows every body movement with instant increased support in case of strain. Cannot slip whether at work or play. Light. Waterproof. Can be worn in bath. Send for amazing FREE book. "Advice To Ruptured" and details of liberal truthful 60-day trial offer. Also endorsements from grateful users in your neighborhood. Write:
CLUTHE SONS, Dept. 33, Bloomfield, New Jersey

JOBS ON SHIPS & YACHTS

MEN (16 to 50) Go to Sea. Travel foreign countries. Experience unnecessary. Civilian occupation. Excellent pay. Ship and yachting jobs adventurous-exciting.
Write for FREE information.
DAVENPORT SEAMEN'S SERVICE, Dept. 4J
BOX 4J, G. P. O. NEW YORK 1, N. Y.

ACCOUNTANT
BECOME AN EXPERT
SEND FOR FREE SAMPLE LESSON
Executive Accountants and C. P. A's earn $6,000 to $10,000 a year. Thousands of firms need them. We train you thoroly at home in spare time for C. P. A's examinations or executive accounting positions. Previous experience unnecessary. Personal training under supervision of staff of C. P. A's. Placement counsel. Write for free book, "Accountancy, the Profession That Pays," and sample lesson.
LASALLE Extension University, 417 So. Dearborn St.
A Correspondence Institution, Dept. 5329H, Chicago 5, Ill.

EARN OVER
$25 WEEKLY
Address Our Postcards at Home
Good Handwriting Necessary
WRITE ATLAS BOX 188, Dept. 15 MELROSE, MASS.

High School Course at Home
Many Finish in 2 Years
Go as rapidly as your time and abilities permit. Course equivalent to resident school work — prepares for college entrance exams. Standard H. S. texts supplied. Diploma. Credit for H. S. subjects already completed. Single subjects if desired. High school education is very important for advancement in business and industry and socially. Don't be handicapped all your life. Be a High School graduate. Start your training now. Free Bulletin on request. No obligation.
American School, Dept. H558, Drexel at 58th, Chicago 37
Canadian Residents: Complete Canadian Course Available. Write American School, 1610 Sherbrooke St. West, Montreal.

she turned onto Main Street, it was empty except for a stagecoach standing with one door open.

She glanced at the rim of the cliff. Could the Burls tell she was a woman? If they could, would it make any difference? She had heard talk of the three brothers for a long time, but until now it had been nothing for her to worry about.

On the west side of the street men were watching her, and she heard one of them call something as the buggy reached the bank. Without waiting to find out what it was, Jean drove into the alley, jumped down, and ran to the door.

Alex met her there and pulled her inside.

"Jean, you shouldn't have come here."

"Is Father all right?"

"Yes, he's in his office."

Jean brushed past the cashier and hurried to her father's private office. He was sitting at his desk, staring at the wall. His face was gray and in his eyes was something she had never seen before.

"Shut the door," he said heavily, expressing no surprise at her being here.

She closed the door and walked over to the desk.

"You can't just sit here," she said. "You've got to get out of town."

"I'd never make it. Even if I did there's no place I could go where they wouldn't find me," her father said.

"There must be something you can do."

He shook his head. "Besides, if I ran out and left the others, I'd never be able to live it down."

"You'd still be alive!" Jean cried.

"But I'd be finished here. Everything I've worked so hard for would be destroyed."

She sat down across from him, searching her mind for a solution. Then she said, "Surely there's enough of you to stop those men when they come."

He did not look up. "I know nothing of guns. I'm a business man, the same as the others. We wouldn't stand a chance against the Burls."

"There must be someone you can get," Jean said.

"Yes, there's Clay Gannon, but he refuses to help."

Jean stared at him. "Have you talked to Clay?"

"Yes. I offered him money, a lot of money, but he turned me down."

Jean said, "Dad, I'm going to tell you something you won't like."

"That you've been having an affair with Gannon?"

"You mean you—"

"I found out just this morning."

KNOWING him as she did, Jean wondered how he could sit there and talk of it without showing violent reactions.

"It was a shock," he said. "I wanted to have him horsewhipped and run out of town. But after I calmed down, I decided I'd have to make the best of it, if Gannon's the man you're in love with."

Jean averted her face as she said, "I'm not sure I do love him."

"Of course you love him. A daughter of mine wouldn't carry on with a man she didn't love."

"I thought I did, but I've been mixed up, not knowing what I wanted."

Randall said, more to himself than to her, "Perhaps we can make something of him. I could give him a job here at the bank. I'm sure I could do something."

With quiet bitterness, Jean said, "Would you actually let me marry him in the hope he would save your precious position in this town?"

"It's more than my position, Jean. My life's at stake, and the lives of other men."

Conflicting thoughts were in her mind. Her own father was attempting to use her as bait. He was willing to let her marry a man he had wanted to run out of town, only to save his reputation.

Deep lines were in his face, desperation in his eyes. She felt sick. How different he was from the man she'd always known! Looking at him, she was thinking, fear has done this to him.

"Will you go see him, Jean?" he asked, almost pleadingly.

Could she refuse him? Did she want to? Jean thought of many things, trying to make up her mind.

(To be concluded in the next issue)

SHORT GRASS

(Concluded from Page 94)

you wanted. I reckon you and your mother will join up with the company and go on to California. You won't need me. I'll take my horse and oxen and head back for home."

Mandy looked across the bareness of the prairie, and for an instant saw the great elms along the streets of a little town.

"Home," she said. "What will you do in High Falls, Jas?"

"Why, take care of the farm. There's plenty to do and too few men left to do it."

"We've wasted a lot of time for you, Jasper. It's getting late in the season."

"Too late for spring planting, of course."

Mandy said, "Is it too late for a wedding, Jasper?"

Her voice sounded small and lost, like a little girl's. For an instant he stood, not answering, and she put her hands over her eyes and stumbled to the rear of the wagon. She heard him saying, "Wait, honey, wait," and stood still in an agony of shame.

Jasper said, "I thought I'd spoiled my chances with you. But if you'll have me—"

He caught her in his arms, and Mandy turned blindly to meet his kiss.

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 86)

1. "Ome" as in "home": OME-bray.

2. South Texas.

3. Juniper trees, so called because the pattern of their bark resembles alligator skin.

4. New Mexico.

5. Pat Garrett killed Billy the Kid, Jeff Milton killed Three-Fingered Jack Patterson, Billy Breakenridge killed Billy Grounds.

6. Bull and cow.

7. Five cartridges in the cylinder of a six-shooter.

8. New Mexico.

9. I.R.A. Champion All-Round Cowboy.

10. Tiger lily, elephant head, lady slipper, mariposa (or sego) lily.

New FALSE PLATE for OLD IN 24 HOURS

Low As Only $15.95

***Wonderful New Scientific Method Transforms OLD, LOOSE, Cracked or Chipped Plates into* LUSTROUS BEAUTY-PINK DUPONT PLASTIC PLATES**

MONEY BACK GUARANTEE

Why envy beautiful false teeth of others? We will transform your old, loose, cracked or chipped plate into a beautiful new, lightweight DuPont Beauty-Pink Plastic Plate, using your own teeth. All missing and broken teeth matched and replaced. Your cost amazingly low; actually save many dollars. No impression needed under our new scientific False Plate Method. 24-Hour Service.

SEND NO MONEY Enjoy life again, and save money on beautiful, new, natural-looking plastic plate. Rush name, address for full details sent FREE. If your plate is loose, we show you how to make it comfortable, tight-fitting before duplication.

West Dental Laboratory, 127 N. Dearborn St., Dpt. X-45, Chicago 2, Ill.

RUPTURED

BE *FREE* FROM TRUSS SLAVERY

NOW there is a new modern **Non-Surgical** treatment that permanently corrects rupture. These **Non-Surgical** treatments are so certain, that a Lifetime Certificate of Assurance is given. Write today for our New FREE Book that gives facts that may save you painful and expensive surgery, and tells how non-surgically you may again work, live, play and love and enjoy life in the manner you desire. There is no obligation.

Excelsior Hernia Clinic, Dept. 3505, Excelsior Springs, Mo.

STOP TOBACCO

Banish the craving for tobacco as thousands have with **Tobacco Redeemer.** Write Today for free booklet telling of injurious effect of tobacco and of a treatment which has relieved over 300,000 people.

In Business Since 1909

FREE BOOK

THE NEWELL COMPANY
153 Clayton St. • St. Louis 5, Mo.

JOBS THAT PAY TO $1,500 MONTHLY

Thousands jobs open. S. America, Europe, Africa, U. S. A., etc. Fare paid if hired. Application forms available. All trades, Labor, Drivers, Clerical, Engineers, etc. No employment fees! Free information. Write Dept. 75W, National Employment Information Service, 1020 Broad, Newark, N. J.

ARTHRITIS—RHEUMATISM VITAL FACTS EXPLAINED

FREE DESCRIPTIVE BOOK

How crippling deformities may be avoided. This amazing FREE BOOK explains why ordinary methods give only temporary relief —if that. Describes a drugless method of treatment successfully applied in thousands of cases. Write for this 44-page FREE BOOK today. No obligation.

BALL CLINIC, DEPT. 504, EXCELSIOR SPRINGS, MO.

***Find* URANIUM!!**

GEIGER COUNTERS for uranium detection. All models and sizes — from low-cost, portable to super-sensitive airborne units. Prices start at $37.50. Also TREASURE DETECTORS and MINERALITES. • FREE INFORMATION •

Detectron CORP. Dept. 27-A
5528 Vineland, North Hollywood, Calif.

WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

by Professor MARCUS MARI

THE GIRL OF ARIES
MARCH 21—APRIL 20

GREAT and turning-point events in people's lives have a strange way of happening under the same star-pattern. For instance, if you were born under Aries, you are quite likely to discover, if you check back, that many, if not most, of the important happenings of your life have taken place under the configuration of Aries. Try checking back; you'll find it fascinating.

Look at Maximilian of Mexico. He was born under the sign of Gemini, and everything of moment that ever happened to him did so under the sign of Gemini. He was born Archduke of Austria, brother of Emperor Francis Joseph, on July 6th, 1832—just after Gemini begins to sink into Cancer. He was sent to be the emperor of Mexico, and arrived to take over his new kingdom on June 12th, 1864—Gemini was then high in the heavens.

The Mexicans finally rebelled, and he was court-matrialed and shot on June 19th, 1867—Gemini on that date was ruling the sky.

Watch your month of birth! Isn't it usually the time that changes in your life have taken place? Check with your friends about their birth months. It is actually not so odd at all—as a good many people have remarked—that so many famous ones have been born, have married, and died in their horoscopic sign.

It is your star-ruling period.

You may receive a personal reading by sending this coupon to Professor Mari in care of Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. ENCLOSE STAMPED AND SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE. (Canadians enclose three cents instead of stamp.)

Name..... Sex.....

Address.....

.....

Exact date of birth: Year.....Month.....Date of Month.....4-22-55

NOW!
The Greatest
HOSPITALIZATION VALUE EVER OFFERED

Smiling and healthy today — in a Hospital bed tomorrow! Be ready!

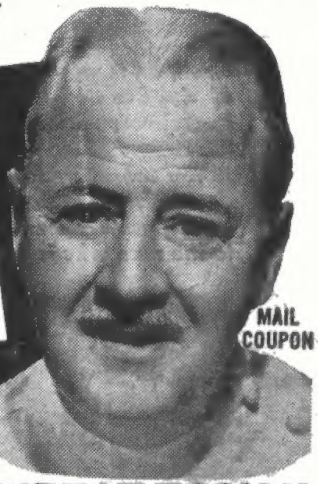
Sky-high Hospital bills can wreck your life savings. Insure now!

We pay benefits for as long as you stay in Hospital. NO TIME LIMIT!

PROTECTS YOU and YOUR FAMILY IN CASE OF SICKNESS or ACCIDENT . .

No Time Limit HOSPITAL PLAN

PAYS BENEFITS FOR **FULL STAY** IN HOSPITAL



MAIL COUPON

COSTS ONLY **Pennies a Day**

Policy Sold Only By Mail! Good Anywhere in U.S. & Possessions! If sickness or accident puts you in a Hospital bed — you'll look back and thank your lucky stars you were wise enough to take out the "NO TIME LIMIT" Policy. It's the sensible, practical way to protect your own bank account against the onslaught of high Hospital costs. So ACT TODAY! Do it before trouble strikes.

YOU CAN GET MATERNITY For slight extra cost husband and wife can have a MATERNITY RIDER attached to their regular Policy and this will entitle the couple to a liberal Benefit for childbirth confinement and care.

POLICY BACKED BY STRONG RELIABLE COMPANY
We do business in all 48 states and U. S. possessions. Claims are paid promptly in strict accordance with Policy provisions.

LIFE INSURANCE CO. OF AMERICA
Wilmington 99, Delaware

WE PAY CASH DIRECT TO YOU

IN ADDITION TO WHAT YOU MAY COLLECT FROM OTHER INSURANCE

Go to the Hospital for a day, a week, a month, a year or longer — your "NO TIME LIMIT" Policy pays Benefits for sickness or accidents just as long as you stay — *there's absolutely no time limit!* What blessed help! What's more, the "NO TIME LIMIT" Policy pays off in cash direct to you — regardless of what you may collect from any other insurance policy for the same disability, including Workmen's Compensation.

ACCIDENTAL DEATH, SURGERY, POLIO BENEFITS We give you more coverage, better coverage, longer coverage at low cost. You get generous Hospital Room and Board Benefits for sickness or accident (Exclusions: Gov't Hosp., Rest Homes, Sanitariums; Mental Diseases, War Casualties, Suicide) . . . you get Cash Benefits for 73 Surgical Operations . . . In lieu of other benefits you get Lump Cash for accidental death . . . Cash Payment for loss of eyes, hands, feet . . . special Polio Protection. Policy can be continued at Policyholder's or Company's option. One Policy covers individual or entire family, birth to age 75. You'll see the low costs in the booklet we send you. DON'T TAKE CHANCES — BE PROTECTED. Send for our FREE BOOK which tells all about this remarkable insurance.

DON'T WAIT TILL IT'S TOO LATE! ACT NOW!

***Mail Coupon for* FREE BOOK**
NO OBLIGATION
NO AGENT WILL CALL

RUSH COUPON FOR VALUABLE FREE BOOK

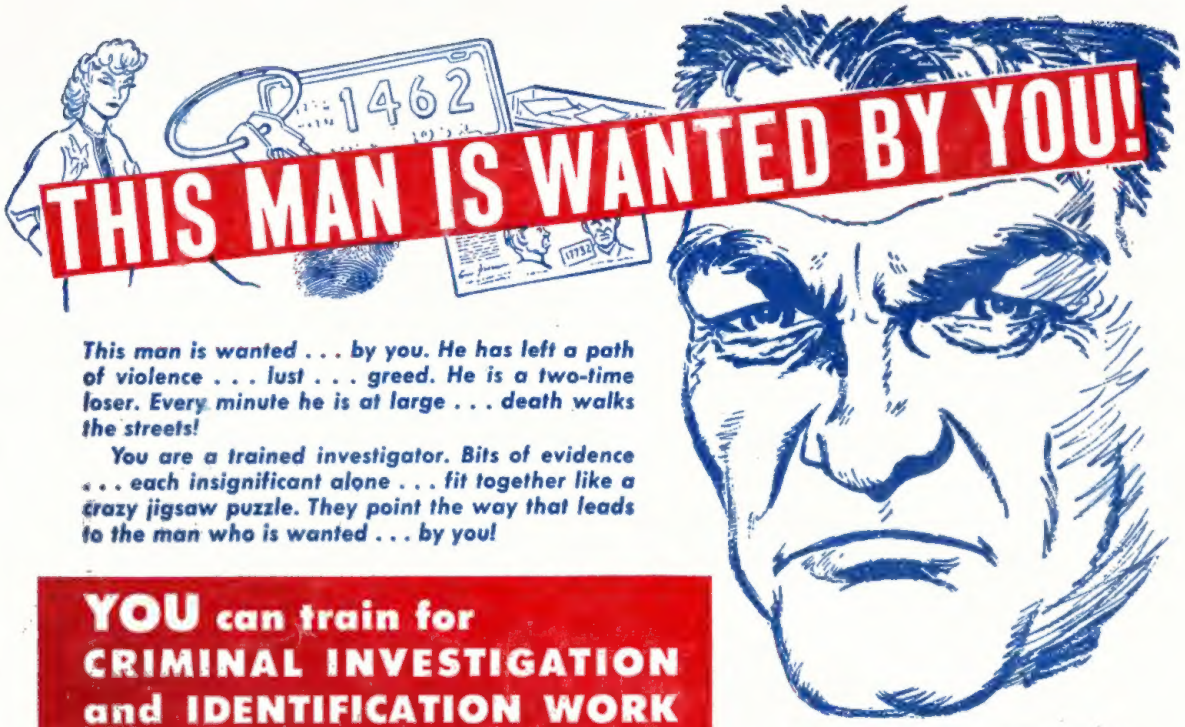
LIFE INSURANCE CO. OF AMERICA
Dept. 555-TG, Wilmington 99, Del.

Please send me, without obligation, full details about your new, low cost NO TIME LIMIT HOSPITAL Plan. No agent will call.

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... Zone ..... State .....



THIS MAN IS WANTED BY YOU!

This man is wanted . . . by you. He has left a path of violence . . . lust . . . greed. He is a two-time loser. Every minute he is at large . . . death walks the streets!

You are a trained investigator. Bits of evidence . . . each insignificant alone . . . fit together like a crazy jigsaw puzzle. They point the way that leads to the man who is wanted . . . by you!

YOU can train for CRIMINAL INVESTIGATION and IDENTIFICATION WORK

right in your own home!

You can begin training for a future in *finger print identification . . . firearms identification . . . police photography . . . criminal investigation* . . . now, in your spare time . . . right in your own home!

Scientific crime investigation is truly a science. It is stimulating work . . . exacting work that demands highly-skilled and trained investigators. *You can be trained as thousands of others have been trained—right in your own home—in your spare time.* And your own ability will *determine* how quickly you can become a trained operator—with an opportunity to serve in one of a variety of skilled jobs in the field of criminal investigation.

Today, hundreds of our students and graduates are employed in identification bureaus from coast-to-coast. They have regular jobs—regular salaries—and, most important, they're working in the field they know and like best—the field of criminal investigation. *Most of these men had little or no training before they began our course!*

LOOK AT OUR RECORD!

Here are a few of the bureaus which have employed IAS trained men.

Camden, Ala.	Middlesboro, Ky.
Jonesboro, Ark.	Lake Charles, La.
Corona, Cal.	Old Orchard, Maine
Oakland, Cal.	Annapolis, Md.
Canon City, Col.	North Attleboro, Mass.
Hartford, Conn.	Muskegon, Mich.
Wethersfield, Conn.	Ypsilanti, Mich.
Washington, D. C.	Minneapolis, Minn.
Clearwater, Fla.	Galveston, Tex.
Augusta, Ga.	Roanoke, Va.
Boise, Idaho	Bellingham, Wash.
Chicago Heights, Ill.	Huntington, W. Va.
Hammond, Ind.	Marshfield, Wisc.
Muncie, Ind.	Cheyenne, Wyo.
Dubuque, Iowa	London, Ont., Canada
Topeka, Kan.	Honolulu, Hawaii

Investigate your opportunities in criminal investigation work! Send today for your free copy of "Blue Book of Crime," learn how you can begin training for a new, exciting career!

FREE! BLUE BOOK OF CRIME

Plus Free Information On How You Can Begin Training . . . Now!

This book tells you how science helps fight crime, including true case histories! It will show YOU how YOU, can get started in this important training . . . now, on an easy, pay as you train budget plan! Clip this coupon . . . send for your FREE copy of BLUE BOOK OF CRIME . . . today!

INSTITUTE OF APPLIED SCIENCE

(A Correspondence School Since 1918)

Dept. 7963, 1920 Sunnyside Ave., Chicago 40, Ill.

INSTITUTE OF APPLIED SCIENCE
Dept. 7963, 1920 Sunnyside Ave., Chicago 40, Ill.

Gentlemen: Without obligation, send me the "Blue Book of Crime" and list of more than 800 Identification Bureaus employing I.A.S. graduates. Also give me information regarding cost and terms. (No salesman will call.)

NAME_____ AGE_____

ADDRESS_____ RFD OR ZONE_____

CITY_____ STATE_____